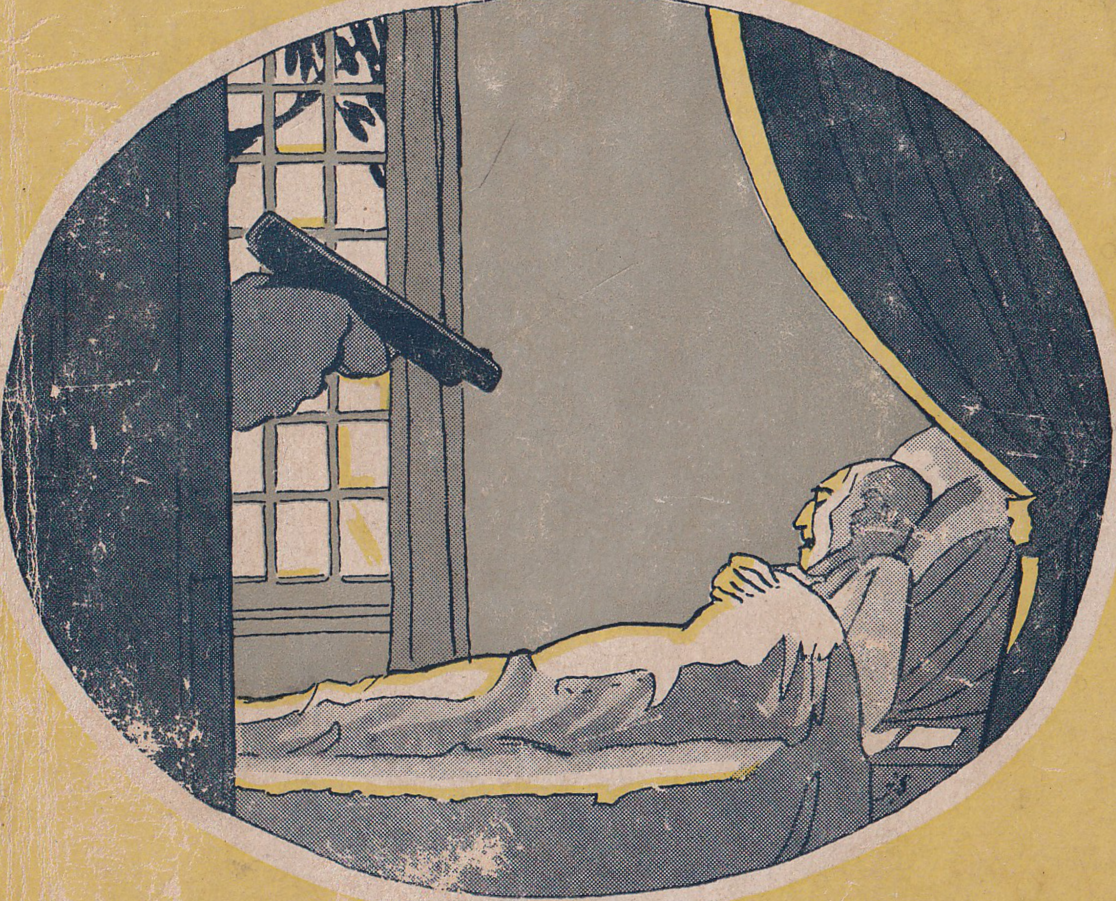
SHOT IN THE DARK

Gerard Fairlie



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A thrilling novel of mystery and detection by the author of SUSPECT

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THE CRIME
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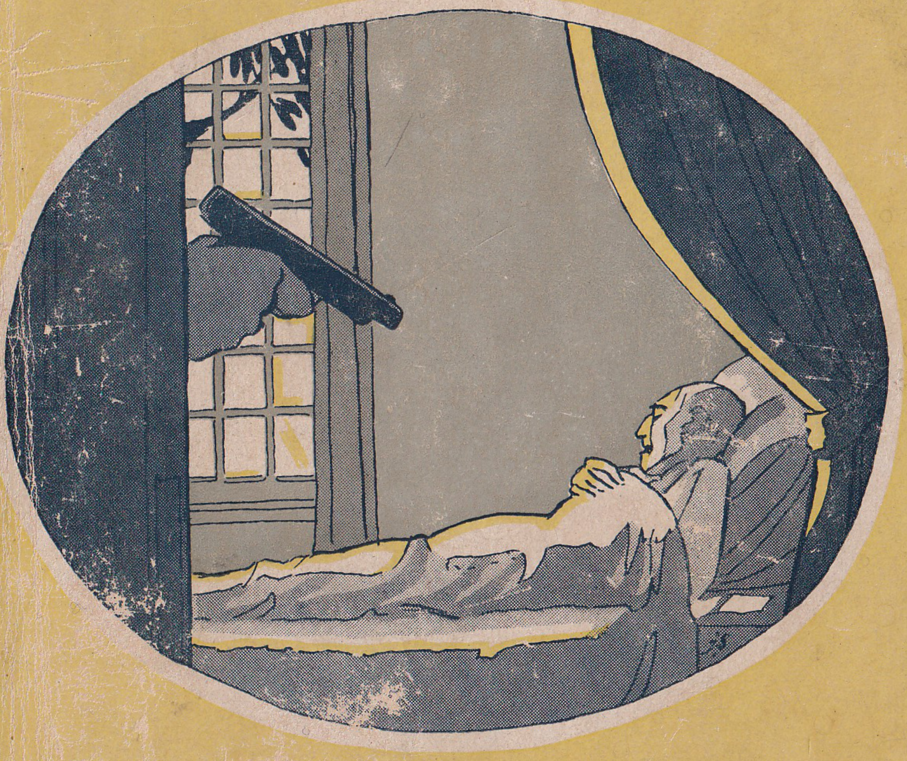

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IT was then that Mr. Malcolm entered the picture—Mr. Malcolm, who asked the police inspector,

"I wonder how many verdicts of suicide accompanied by insanity really are the work of a mad man?"—who followed a golf ball into the tragic reading of a dead man's will, said calmly, "I'm staying!" and walked headlong into the murderous turmoil that the death of old Mr. Browne had left behind.

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Thomas Confectionery
812 SCOTT AVENUE
Wichita Falls, Texas

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BOOKS BY

GERARD FAIRLIE

SHOT IN THE DARK
SUSPECT
THE MUSTER OF THE VULTURES
THE EXQUISITE LADY
THE MAN WHO LAUGHED
SCISSORS CUT PAPER
STONE BLUNTS SCISSORS

GERARD FAIRLIE

SHOT IN THE DARK

"You know that I am dead," said the voice imprisoned on the innocent-looking phonograph record that the family lawyer had placed on the machine. "Well, let me tell you this . . . there can be no possible doubt that I have been murdered . . ."

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FIRST EDITION

SHOT IN THE DARK

CHAPTER I

A CATARACT of sound, wild, ferocious, shocking in its abandoned frenzy, swept over the old house, making its very rafters tremble in clattering protest, drawing moans of fear from the rattling windows and staccato echoes from their hollow woodwork.

Then came a lull . . . a moment or two of peace, as though the storm itself were drawing breath after such desperate outburst . . . and then a jagged streak forking across the sky like the zigzag passage of some monster sickle, reaping a harvest of tumultuous sound and of shattering rebuke. The wind joined in the noise with tremendous joy, bending the branches of the poplar trees to depths to which their dignities had never dreamed, lashing the waters of the lake into a tiny ocean, and moaning down the crumbling chimneys some eerie tales of monstrous hate.

A lull . . . a sudden flash . . . and then another nightmare peal.

For three long hours now had the storm been raging, three hours of ceaseless noise, torrential rain, alarming flashes, and nervous suspense. Over the sodden ruin of the tennis court—a floral offering on the grave of its smoothness—lay strewn a mass of pink-tipped petals, first victims of the onslaught of the wind. The narrow copse of fir trees on the right fought stridently against its onset, while farther back, beyond the open stretch of land where lay the golf course, the sea boomed in powerful unison, thrusting enormous waves upon the glittering pebbles.

Noise . . . noise . . . and ever-increasing noise, which lacerated the nerves and destroyed all resistance. And within a ground-floor room of the buffeted house, fear—like some living presence—filled the air.

Each recurring flash of lightning brought out vividly the ashen face of the man who lay in bed, gave a clear glimpse of his eyes, bloodshot, immense, fixed in a fascinated dread upon the windows, his hands writhing eternally at every thunderclap. So had he lain throughout the hours, his eyes probing the shadows of the room with almost an uncanny fear.

This man was mortally afraid, but it was clear to see that he was afraid not so much of the storm as of some unknown peril. He had the appearance of a haunted man, and the storm itself was but a fit setting for the fear which lay within him.

Suddenly, in a temporary lull successive to a resounding thunderclap, the door was thrust open. On the threshold, her slender figure silhouetted against the light of the passage, stood a young girl.

"Shut that door!"

The voice was high-pitched and querulous, the voice of an irritated or frightened old man, and the girl, stepping inside the room, did as she was told. But as she did so she turned on the light.

"Why are you lying here in the dark?"

"Turn off that light."

For a moment the girl stood motionless, astonished at the note of agonized fear which was only too apparent in the voice from the bed.

"Turn off that damn light, I tell you."

Startled, her hand flew to the wall and moved the switch. Once again the room was plunged into darkness.

Suddenly she laughed. It was not a very steady laugh, but something of the atmosphere of that room had crept into her bones as she entered, something of the old man's apprehension had been imparted to her by his voice.

"Watching the storm?" she asked, as lightly as she could. "It's rather fun sitting in the dark and looking at the flashes. I've been doing it downstairs."

"With Norman?"

In that moment the girl was glad of the darkness of that room, for a flush had come to her cheeks, a flush partly of embarrassment and partly of anger at the sneering tones in which the question had been asked.

"He was here this evening," she said.

"I know he was here this evening," came the voice from the bed. "The first opportunity when I am laid up and ill in bed is taken by that young man. He doesn't miss any chance of disobeying my instructions, does he?"

"But . . ." The girl's voice wavered for a moment in doubt. "But . . . you're so unreasonable!"

"Unreasonable, am I?" The old man laughed, but it was not a thing of mirth. "Unreasonable! I like that! I suppose just because you make friends with a worthless loafer, I, who pay for this house and everything in it, am expected to keep him. He may come here to lunch, to dinner, between whiles to drink . . . all very convenient."

"Oh!" she said, and then again, "Oh! I wish you wouldn't talk like this. You know . . ."

But he cut in upon her words.

"Yes, I know. Very convenient."

For a few seconds there was a pause, and the storm outside chose at just this moment to illuminate the room with a flash of lightning which seemed to last long after it had gone, so dazzling had been its brilliance. In the sudden gleam the faces of those two in the room jumped into instant relief: the one, old, haggard, worn with illness, ugly with ill temper; the other, young, tired, and worried to the point of tears. For a moment only, and the darkness returned with an added density.

With an effort the girl spoke again.

"You know it's time you were asleep," she said. "It's getting late."

"How can I sleep?"

Once again the petulance of an old and sick man was very evident in his voice.

"But you must try. You really must. You know it's the only thing that does you good in these attacks."

He laughed again.

"I doubt if anything will do me good," he said; "and, in any case, when you and the weather both conspire to rack my brain and crucify my nerves, how in hell do you expect me to compose myself for sleep?"

"We can't help the storm," she said gently, "but surely I haven't done anything."

He laughed once more, a caricature of a sound which was by nature meant to be mirthful; but this was only a cynical laughter which made it ugly, malicious.

"You help a lot, don't you? You allow your lover to come snooping about the house as soon as I am incapacitated."

"Oh," she said, "don't call him that, please. You know he's not my lover."

"He says he loves you, doesn't he?"

"Yes," she spoke softly, "he says he loves me, but . . ."

"But fiddlesticks! You go in direct contravention to what I have ordered. What is your position in this house, after all? Don't you owe everything to me?"

"Oh, yes."

There was a resigned note in her voice, a note which seemed to say that she knew well enough all that she owed to him, and that it was not her fault if he made it impossible for her to acknowledge it as she might wish.

"I've given you everything all along the line, everything you wanted. Home, keep, clothes . . . everything. And the first chance you get, when I warn you against a man who is obviously only after the money that he thinks I am going to leave you . . . the first chance you get you flout my wishes, throw them in my face . . . and all this with a mask of meekness! Oh, yes, you're very good at pretending, aren't you? You appear to be so considerate, so obedient, and behind my back you laugh . . . laugh at me . . . and then do just as you damn well please. Pleasant, isn't it?"

His voice had become almost hysterical, and the girl paused a moment before replying. Then:

"You must go to sleep," she said quietly. From long experience she knew how utterly useless it was to argue with the old man when in these moods. "You know what the doctor said."

"Yes," said the man, "yes, I know what the doctor said. Rest," he laughed, "rest and sleep. He thinks I'm a neurotic, that's what he thinks. He doesn't realize that . . ."

His voice had risen to a scream, but he checked himself in mid-sentence.

"That what?" asked the girl.

But the mood was over. That moment in which he might have explained the thing which was worrying him so much, that thing which was a mystery to the girl, that moment of expansion had gone.

"I can't sleep," he said abruptly. "In any case, I haven't had my medicine."

Quickly she moved over to a cupboard in the corner of the room. With fumbling fingers she tried to open it.

"I can't see," she said. "You must let me turn on the light."

"Here!" She heard him feeling for the matches by his bedside. "Here . . . use these."

"Why won't you let me put on the light?" she asked. "It would be so much simpler."

"*Use these!*"

His voice was imperious, masterful: even though its tones were weak and tremulous it yet retained a certain power, a hint of domination and authority which forced the girl to obey his will. She took the matches, lit one, and selecting a bottle from the cupboard, she poured some of its contents into a medicine glass. In the light of the match her face appeared very white and set, but as she slipped the bottle back into the cupboard her fingers trembled slightly as though in sudden fear. The match burnt them, and she dropped it quickly with a muttered exclamation of annoyance.

"There," she said, "I've burnt myself."

But the old man only smiled, a smile which the darkness hid from her, a smile which, in the circumstances, was ugly with pleasure. She moved over to the side of the bed, her eyes accustomed now to the prevailing gloom, and handed him the glass. He swallowed the liquid at a gulp, returned the glass to the table by his side, and leant back upon the pillows.

There came another brilliant flash, and the girl was freshly startled to see that his face was as white as the linen upon which his head was resting.

"Now go away," he muttered curtly.

For a moment she hesitated, then lightly she bent over and touched his forehead with her lips.

"Good-night," she said.

There came no answer from the bed, and turning quickly, the girl slipped silently across the room, opened the door, and closed it gently behind her.

A sudden gust of wind made the windows rattle with even greater clamour, and at the uproar the man raised himself upon one elbow and cast a hurried, feverish glance about the room. Then, with a heavy sigh, he lay back once more upon the bed, his eyes closed, the fingers of one hand clutching the counterpane as though for protection.

Five minutes passed, and to the strident noises of the storm which filled the room another sound was added . . . the laboured breathing of a sleeping man. For a little while the breathing continued . . . and then, as though at the sudden warning of some watchman in his brain, the man awoke.

His heart was beating violently, beads of perspiration lay upon his brow, and for a few seconds he remained quite motionless, in the grip of that icy panic which so often accompanies a nightmare awakening. But it was from no nightmare peril that he had now been wrenched: that which had lain within his mind, forcing it to wakefulness, was no creation of a fevered slumber. The danger lay within that room, and, steeling his body into complete immobility, his eyes, wild and distorted, searched the darkness, searched with a desperate eagerness for that which had demanded his instant alertness. There had been no betraying sound perceptible above the uproar of the storm to cause his panic, but with the conviction of despair he knew that that which he had feared for many months, that which had lain like a gloom upon his soul, embittering his spirit, destroying his peace by day, his rest by night, was now upon him. Danger, like some hovering vulture, lurked within the room.

Raising his head slightly from the pillows, he stared keenly into the surrounding shadows, and then his eyes, roving restlessly about, became fixed rigidly upon the ceiling. On the instant the man's face was tinged with a greater pallor and his limbs were paralyzed in the clutch of a great fear: for upon the ceiling was an ever-increasing shaft of light, a shaft which moved slowly, almost imperceptibly, but with an obvious purpose. A moment more the man lay rigid and then, turning his head noiselessly, he stared at the door.

It was opening, opening slowly and with a sinister silence which, in itself, was the very source of fear.

The most vital of all human instincts, that of self-preservation, nerved his limbs to act. With a rapid movement he slipped from the bed and crouched down upon the floor beside it.

And on the instant there was a curious metallic click and a bullet imbedded itself in the wall immediately above the pillows of his bed, immediately above the hollow where a moment before his head had rested.

Sick with terror, the old man crouched motionless upon the floor, the beating of his heart seeming to fill the room with betraying clangour. He dared not move his head to look towards the door, but remained for an eternity of suspense, listening . . . listening for some approaching step, some sound of human breathing. But there was none, and at last he nerved himself enough to raise his head towards that sinister shaft on the ceiling. It was moving again, but now decreasing, and it was a few seconds before his stupefied mind was able to realize the fact that the door must this time be closing. Still more the shaft decreased until it vanished, and with a wild throb of relief the terrified man knew that the door must now be closed.

In one bound he was on his feet, had reached the door, and with shaking fingers had turned the key within its lock. Then with dragging steps he moved slowly back to the bed and flung himself quivering upon it. For a few minutes he lay thus, trembling from head to foot, in the grip of that icy panic which so often succeeds the actual moment of escape. But gradually, as his nerves became a little calmed, this was replaced by another feeling, that of an intense relief.

A relief, however, which was short-lived. For into the seething turmoil of his mind another thought had entered. Supposing he were not alone, supposing that his assailant was even now crouched within the room, moving with stealthy tread to see that his aim had indeed been true? What if the danger were within, locked in by himself? The thought was torture, and in one moment all his fears and dread returned.

An eternity of suspense blanched the old man's lips to the colour of his face. He waited motionless . . . almost longing for his worst fears to be realized, for anything that would banish once and for all this agony of waiting. At last he could endure it no longer. Rising suddenly to his feet, he leant against the posts of his bed, searching the darkness with eyes made keen by terror. But there was nothing. A vivid flash of lightning lit the room, and in its familiar angles he could see no crouching form, no figure hiding in the shadows.

Reassured, he tiptoed silently from the bed, and, with a courage born of despair, he searched the room thoroughly for any alien presence. A resounding crash of thunder overhead set the blood racing madly in his veins once more. He clung to a chair for support, and then, realizing whence the noise had come, he renewed his search with a dawn of hope. Save for him the room seemed to be empty, and satisfied at last that he was indeed alone, he moved slowly back to the bed, raising himself wearily upon it, and lay there once more with closed eyes, striving to quieten his nerves so that his brain might try to comprehend all that had happened.

A few grains of plaster fell upon his face from the hole in the wall where the bullet was imbedded, and turning around, he stared at it carefully, with a grim attention. The aim had been good, almost miraculously good. Only someone whose knowledge of the topography of that room was at least as great as his own could have directed that shot: so much was certain. The thought was not a pleasant one, and the old man clenched his hands together miserably.

There had been no sound of any shot, nothing but that tiny click to herald its approach, and were it not for the fact that some subconscious instinct in his mind had forced him into wakefulness, he would now be lying there senseless, would have slipped from sleep to death without a struggle to escape. His enemy had chosen his time with a perfect cunning, for had he awoken and cried for help no sound could have penetrated to the ears of anyone outside above the noise and clamour of the storm. Even had the revolver not been fitted with a silencer—as this one so surely must have been—yet would the shot have gone unnoticed, the storm itself accounting for any similar noise.

With a shaking hand the old man wiped the beads of perspiration from his brow, and lay with anguished eyes turned to the ceiling.

Within the room someone suddenly laughed.

CHAPTER II

THE door of the small ante-room adjacent to the Coroner's Court was suddenly thrown open, and the doctor and police inspector entered.

"There you are, Doctor," said the inspector, a jovial fellow. "Sit down on that chair."

He moved over to a cupboard, opened it, and took from it two glasses and a bottle.

"Supposed to be brandy," he laughed, "in case any witness feels queer, but by the time they feel queer they don't know whether it's brandy or whisky, so I keep the better stuff. Say when!"

Returning the bottle to the cupboard, he sat down opposite the doctor.

"Well?"

"Perfectly satisfied," said the doctor precisely.

He was a very precise little man in many ways, officious and as obstinate as any mule: a direct contrast to the burly and sociable inspector.

"Perfectly satisfied," he repeated. "Consider the circumstances. The revolver—his own—was found gripped in his hand . . . he was shot through the head, a perfectly feasible shot for any man to perform on himself . . . also, two chambers of his revolver were found emptied. Where's the hitch?"

The inspector frowned thoughtfully.

"It seems a funny thing to me, Doctor," he said, "that two shots should be fired in the dead of the night by a revolver which is not fitted with a silencer, and that no one in the house should hear them."

The doctor smiled a little derisively.

"My dear Inspector," he said quickly, "aren't you forgetting the night in question? A thousand shots could have been fired and yet gone unheard. It was the worst storm we've had in these parts for twenty years . . . why, the very branches of the trees were snapping off with reports just like gunshots."

The other nodded slowly.

"Yes," he said at last, "that's quite true . . . but still . . ."

"As a matter of fact," broke in the doctor, "it's just the sort of thing that I should have expected Mr. Browne to do."

"Killed himself?"

The inspector's words formed a question.

"Yes."

There was a pause, and during that pause the doctor noticed with surprise that the expression on the inspector's face was worried.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Abruptly the inspector looked up.

"Now look here, Doctor," he said, "the thing is over—the Coroner's Jury has returned that Mr. Browne shot himself in a moment of insanity. This verdict was very largely arrived at through the fact that you testified that for some months past Mr. Browne had been neurotic and imagined himself persecuted, but when pressed to give some explanation as to who was persecuting him or why . . . he could not do so. Is that right?"

"Correct," said the doctor.

"Very well, then. Is that a common thing to happen to a man who is suffering from nerves?"

The little doctor sat back. He felt happy: he felt important. It was not often in this quiet country place that he was in a position similar to that in which he now found himself.

"Happily," he said, "it is not often that neurosis comes upon a man so badly that he will do this sort of thing, but it is the logical outcome of neurosis, provided the disease is not checked."

"It is a definite disease, then?"

"Yes—and no. It is not actually a disease of the body. It is merely an overwrought condition of the nerves, brought about by strain and worry. You have heard of a man collapsing at the end of a race. There is no disease there: all that he has done is to overtax his strength. But that is physical, although it is exactly the same thing that happens to a man who suffers from a nervous breakdown, the only difference being that he has overtaxed his brain."

"I see," said the inspector thoughtfully. "I see. You think Mr. Browne was mad at the time that he took his life . . . if he did?"

"Don't keep on saying 'if he did,'" said the doctor irritably. "Of course he did. I did my best with him, but it was impossible. He was too far gone before he came to me. He was not ill physically, only mentally, but that can be as bad, if not worse, than some actual disease."

"He was mad?" persisted the inspector.

"Yes. He was mad all right. Mad with the fear of something unknown, and something which he could not himself explain. A most extraordinary case, but by no means unique."

"He was mad enough," said the inspector, watching the little man opposite him closely, watching his eyes in particular so that no hint of hesitation should escape him, "to shoot at himself and miss himself and shoot again to kill?"

Without the slightest hesitation the little doctor replied:

"He was."

"Isn't that very extraordinary? Doesn't that require a courage which one doesn't usually associate with the type of coward who takes his own life?"

"It is not in the least extraordinary," said the doctor. "You must remember the one essential thing—that we cannot judge any of Mr. Browne's actions in comparison with any of our own. We are sane, and he was in the grip of an uncontrollable fear which probably made him long for the relief of death far more than his natural instinct would cling to life."

"The storm on the night in question would help that state of mind?"

"Undoubtedly."

"You know, Doctor"—the inspector sat back in his chair and lit a cigarette—"I wish I felt completely satisfied, as satisfied as you are, for instance. I think it is so extraordinary for a man to make up his mind to shoot himself and to key himself up to the extent which must be necessary for such an action . . . and then to miss, and to do it all over again."

The doctor smiled before replying:

"The jury found no difficulty in believing it."

For answer the inspector shrugged his shoulders.

"I know they didn't," he said.

The doctor leant forward earnestly.

"Now look here, Inspector. You are on the wrong track. You're travelling by the right road, but you are on the wrong side, which is dangerous driving. You must understand that the man was mad—that is only another word for neurosis. He was not responsible for his actions. While I agree with you that it would be a most extraordinary thing, requiring tremendous courage, for any normal being . . . he was not normal. Anything that he may have done, therefore, cannot be judged by any of our standards of courage or cowardice."

The inspector finished his drink and rose to his feet.

"You have no doubt whatever, then, Doctor," he said, "that the verdict of 'Suicide whilst of unsound mind' which the jury has brought in is obviously correct?"

"Perfectly satisfied," said the doctor with conviction.

The inspector sighed.

"Oh, well," he said, "I'm glad in one way. I can dismiss the whole thing from my mind."

But as soon as he was alone and the doctor had left, the inspector realized that this was a great deal easier to say than to do. All during the remainder of the day, throughout the petty worries of his daily round, the jovial police officer was very different from his normal self: so much so that his subordinates noticed that he was worried and gave him as wide a berth as possible. When worried there could be few more irritable people, but normally he was easy to get on with and well liked by his men. They understood him well enough not to worry him unduly when that frown, which they were accustomed to look for as at a weathervane, was lining his forehead.

Nearly half an hour earlier than usual the inspector rose from his desk in his office and left the building. He walked slowly through the village towards the open ground beyond. He wanted to be alone to think, and his steps, perhaps without his noticing it, led him towards that lonely house which had been the scene of the tragedy such a short time before. As he approached it he looked up, and something in its aspect made him remark to himself that it was indeed an excellent background for just such a happening as had occurred within its walls. Built of grey stone which had become weathered to a dingy black, it stood gaunt and alone, separated on one side by the straggling tennis court, on the other by a narrow copse of fir trees, from the open stretch of land where lay the golf course. Appearances had mattered little to the man who was dead, and about the whole mansion hung an air of crumbling ruin, of unkempt dilapidation, which only years of neglect could possibly have contrived.

The inspector let his thoughts wander, gave them full rein, but his imagination had got the better of him, and something about the grim building—the lack of flowers in the untidy garden, the paths untended and the plants uncared for, all so typical of the man who had owned it—made him shudder.

He turned away and, striking across the golf course, made for the clubhouse. Here at least, at this hour of the evening, he was sure to find a few kindred spirits with whom he could chat for a few moments before going home, and thus rid himself of his morbid uneasiness. He entered the clubhouse and looked around him. It was a small building, composed only of a living and a changing room, but then Westdale was a sleepy little place, and although the golf course was well spoken of by those experts who occasionally wandered in its direction, the members were few and the place thoroughly democratic. Here, at this time of the evening, could be seen the owners of the few houses in the district, standing a drink to the men who supplied them with their groceries and the necessities of life.

There was a handful of men seated around the room as he entered, and the inspector nodded to one or two who smiled towards him, but he did not immediately go over to any group. Instead he walked to the window and looked out. From there, only a few hundred yards distant, he could see the house whose precincts he had just left. His thoughts began to wander once more, trying to visualize the scene in that room on the night of the storm, when a mad man's courage had made him fire and miss and fire again.

Someone touched his arm.

The inspector jumped. So absorbed had he been in his thoughts that he had not noticed the approach of a fellow member of the club until physically reminded of his presence.

"Hullo, Inspector! You're very thoughtful. Had a hard day?"

The transition from that state of morbid uneasiness with which the inspector had struggled throughout the entire day, ever since the Coroner's Jury had returned its verdict, back towards his normal carefree joviality was extraordinarily abrupt. He smiled. It was evident that he was speaking to a man to whom he wished to speak.

"Hullo, Mr. Malcolm. Yes—I've had a worrying day."

"The inquest, I suppose?"

"The inquest . . . and other things. How's the golf, Mr. Malcolm?"

"Much the same as usual. I contrived to steer several of my drives down the middle of the course this afternoon, but just to level matters not one short putt would go in. However, it's not often that I drive quite well. We must celebrate it, Inspector. What will you have to drink?"

The inspector laughed.

"Just a small one, if you insist."

"I do insist," said his companion. "Most emphatically I do insist. It's not every day that I carry the bunker at the third hole from the tee. Sit down."

Mr. Malcolm moved over to the little hatchway through which drinks were served, and obtained what he required. He carried the two glasses back to the table at which the inspector was seated and sat down beside him.

"A sad thing," he said, "about poor Mr. Browne."

"Yes," said the inspector thoughtfully.

"Of course." Mr. Malcolm seemed in an expansive mood. "Of course, there's a silver lining to everything."

The inspector looked at him sharply.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there will be one person, at least, whose life, perhaps, will be the happier."

"You mean . . . Miss Alaris?"

"Yes."

Mr. Malcolm dropped his voice; evidently he did not wish what he was about to say to be overheard.

"The poor child has not led a very happy life with that man."

"No," said the inspector, "you're quite right, Mr. Malcolm, but you mustn't forget one thing, and that is . . . he adopted her when she was just a child and he has given her a good home."

"A good home?"

"Well"—the inspector laughed—"I suppose so."

"What you really mean," said Mr. Malcolm, "is a roof over her head, clothes to wear, and food to eat, but that doesn't necessarily constitute a good home."

Once again the inspector looked at his companion sharply, but he did not allow the other to notice his scrutiny.

"She was unhappy, then?"

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Malcolm, "of course she was unhappy. Didn't you know that? I thought everyone did."

"Why?"

"I don't know . . . little things. If you'd been there to dine—I went once or twice, you know: I knew old Browne quite well—you'd have seen the way he treated her. By the way, what was the verdict at the inquest? I haven't heard."

"Suicide whilst of unsound mind."

The inspector said the words sharply, but all the same he did not resent being reminded of that thing which had worried him throughout the day. He wanted to talk about it—actually had come to the Golf Club to talk about it.

"I often wonder," said Mr. Malcolm, "whether at these inquests the juries aren't often very charitable. I wonder how many verdicts of suicide accompanied by insanity really are the work of a madman?"

"Why do you say that?" asked the inspector quietly.

"I don't know. I was just wondering. It seems so odd that just because a man who is perfectly sane at one moment should take his life, people immediately turn round and say, 'Oh, he was mad.' Charitable, of course, but the world is not charitable ordinarily, so why in this instance?"

"In this instance?"

"Oh." Mr. Malcolm laughed a little loudly. "I don't mean in regard to our Mr. Browne. I was speaking generally."

"I see," said the inspector thoughtfully. "I see. But, as a matter of fact, I've been worried, Mr. Malcolm, worried all day long about this thing. You see, there was a very peculiar circumstance, quite a unique one as far as my experience is concerned, with regard to Mr. Browne. He must have been a very brave man or—as the doctor says—a very mad one."

"The doctor says he was mad, does he?"

"Yes. It was largely on his evidence that the verdict was brought in."

There was a short pause.

"Why do you say there was a peculiar circumstance?" asked Mr. Malcolm. "I'm interested."

"Well," said the inspector, "two shots had been fired, yet only one shot hit Mr. Browne and that one killed him. Accordingly he must have fired, trying to kill himself—and missed; yet he had the courage immediately afterwards to go through the whole process again, and this time not to fail."

"I see," said Mr. Malcolm. "I see."

For some time there was a pause.

"Of course, he was very neurotic," said Mr. Malcolm. "People like that will do the most extraordinary things."

"Can you imagine yourself," said the inspector, "getting all keyed up to take your life, making a mess of it, and doing it all over again . . . *at once?* I can understand a man determined to take his life repeating the attempt some weeks after his first unsuccessful venture . . . but immediately! Can you see yourself doing that, Mr. Malcolm?"

"No," said Mr. Malcolm at once, "no—I can't. I haven't got the courage of a louse."

The inspector laughed.

"That's not the point. We are assuming, for the moment, that you are mad."

"Oh, I see," said Mr. Malcolm—"well, no, I don't think I can. It's not a likely thing to happen."

"The doctor's argument," went on the inspector, "is that it doesn't really matter what is a likely thing or not: that you can't possibly tell what a madman will do, and also that you cannot possibly judge the actions of a madman in any relation to the actions of, say, you or me. It's a very curious case."

"Well," said Mr. Malcolm suddenly, "if that's your feeling, what are you going to do about it?"

The inspector shrugged his shoulders.

"What can I do about it?" he said. "The jury have returned their verdict and that is the official end of the matter. It has merely opened my eyes to what a madman will do, and I now understand the expression which one hears or sees written so often—'the courage of a madman!' Well, well, I must be off. My wife will wonder what has happened to me. Good-night, Mr. Malcolm. See you again soon."

Mr. Malcolm smiled at the inspector, who rose immediately and left the clubhouse.

But there was nothing of vagueness about him now. He walked home rapidly, looking straight in front of him, but with a satisfied smile playing about his lips and a sly gleam in his eye.

Mr. Malcolm remained seated by the table, sipping his drink, and evidently thinking hard, for his eyes were half-closed as if he were absorbed in his thoughts. But around his lips also there was playing a satisfied, expectant smile. Expectant of what? Mr. Malcolm knew.

CHAPTER III

THROUGHOUT the morning the great iron gate leading, by means of a flagged stone path, to that tragic house wherein a week before death had come so violently upon its owner, clanged metallically as though rebellious at the numerous visitors who sought to pass within its opening. Four people, two men and two women, ignoring its noisy scolding, had made their way swiftly, as though obeying some important summons—as indeed they were—up the moss-covered flags to the iron-studded door, whereon the head of an imposing lion hewn in brass acted as knocker.

Two men and two women—and on all their faces was a similar expression, a curious half-exultant, half-timorous air, as if the business upon which they were now bent held for them tangled skeins, skeins in which the roseate hues of a subdued expectancy were wound about with threads of embarrassment. Yet in their eyes a hint of pleased excitement refused to be stilled. It was many a year since such diverse emotions had entered within that gate, since such electric feelings had invaded those drab walls.

Alaris Browne, stretched at her ease upon a cushioned window seat in the long sitting room to the right of the front door, scanned each new arrival with a keen intentness, an intentness in which was more than a hint of something very much akin to fear. Nothing of this was apparent, however, in the cold composure which sat so familiarly upon her features, too familiarly, indeed, for so young a setting. But in the eyes, grey as the clouds which lay like sails of ships upon the far horizon, there was a light which only a nagging worry could have brought to life. Each one of the visitors was known to her, known to her perhaps too intimately, her very knowledge being the origin of her fear. But as each entered, she jumped lightly to her feet, and moved forward to welcome them with a grace which not even the uncomely blackness of her clothes could quite conceal. After a few words of casual greeting, she slipped back quietly again to the seclusion of her window seat and sat there staring out into the April morning.

It was a day of showers, intermittent bursts of sunshine, and of turbulent wind. A sudden ray struggled through a drifting bank of cloud and lit up, with merciless clearness, the face of the seated girl. It was a sad face, worn sharp where it should have been rounded: the mouth, although intended by nature to give an added beauty to her pleasing features, turned down at the corners in a way which only years of bitterness could have induced. It was a face which, given a little happiness, might have been raised to a striking beauty, for when she smiled—which was but rarely—the effect was almost startling, for two little dimples leaped to life in her cheeks, banishing the disfiguring bitterness, and her eyes lit up with a light in which was a curiously fascinating charm. Her hair was cut short and hung in brown wavy masses about her face.

At the moment she was frowning, frowning as though perplexed, for evidently her thoughts were none too pleasant.

"Well, and how's little Alaris these days? Been having a worrying time, I'm afraid."

The suddenness of the remark jolted the girl out of her thoughts with an abruptness which was obviously disturbing, for when she looked up her face was startled.

"Yes . . . yes, it has been rather awful," she said slowly, but there was a hard note in her voice, and she looked at her companion a little warily.

"Ah, well, it's all over now . . . or nearly so, and then you'll be able to go away and have a thorough rest . . . won't you?"

The words were spoken casually enough, but no one who had ever talked with Colonel Michael Browne would have accused him of making any remark that was entirely casual.

Short, fat, and jovial, there was nothing about the little man to suggest that he was in any way different from that type of retired choleric colonel which he sought so diligently to resemble, save for the sly watchfulness of his shallow blue eyes, a watchfulness which somehow entirely belied the apparently spontaneous chatter which came so glibly to his lips. The Colonel was the dead man's brother, but in one thing only had they been alike . . . in an entire distrust of all with whom they came into contact. In the case of the Colonel, however, there had been no attempt to disguise this deep antipathy beneath a mask of care-free good humour, which—as he so fondly believed—did much to hide it.

In the girl's eyes as she turned to him was a look of fear and aversion.

"Yes," she said at last, speaking very slowly, "yes . . . it's all over now."

The Colonel looked at her sharply.

"And you'll . . . go away?"

This time the man made no attempt to make his question appear casual.

"I don't know." The girl spoke irritably. "I expect so. Why?"

For the moment the Colonel himself seemed a trifle disconcerted.

"Oh . . . I . . . I just thought you ought to, my dear. Do you good, you know. Bring the roses back to those cheeks of yours."

He laughed cheerily, and then moved away towards a decanter which stood upon the sideboard.

Alaris watched his movements thoughtfully, and a cynical smile played about her lips for a moment as she saw him select a glass and pour into it a large portion of undiluted whisky. Only in drinking was there nothing casual where Colonel Michael Browne's actions were concerned. Her gaze strayed from him to the other three people within that room: to the spare, acidulous spinster, the dead man's only sister, whose two interests in life consisted merely in a curiously warped attitude towards religion—that every true-blue Christian always must needs be miserable—and an insatiable joy in the morbid retailing of all kinds of ill-natured gossip. It was rumoured that in her youth Kate Browne had been a good-looking, pleasant young girl: but it was said that an unfortunate love affair had set the cancer of discontent working within her heart, and with the years all trace of gentleness had entirely vanished.

From her Alaris glanced at Angela Browne, the wife of the man who was even now intent upon refilling his glass from the decanter. There was about Angela Browne a certain strangeness, a hint of mystery which had always intrigued the girl: here, she felt, was a being who had strayed into a different world from that for which she had been intended. There was a latent hint of nobility about the traces of beauty which yet remained, a certain reserve in her voice, a proud carriage to her head, and when she looked at her husband at all, no one, not even the man himself, could have attempted a guess at her thoughts. Alaris had always felt a vague sympathy for this woman, a curious friendliness which was fathered by her overwhelming dislike and contempt for the unwholesome Colonel. That such a woman should ever have condescended to marry this man was the one thing which Alaris had never understood, and probably would never understand. Certainly from the proud lips of Angela Browne no such information would ever be forthcoming.

"Well, Miss Browne, you're very thoughtful this morning."

Again the girl started and looked up hastily at the man who had spoken. This time a hint of very real fear had leapt to her eyes, for in Vivien Waugh was embodied all that she most detested in a man. In appearance many would have called him handsome, but there was too much weakness in the soft, indeterminate mouth, too much conceit and hard resolve within his glistening little eyes, to give an onlooker any feeling of assurance. He was altogether too glistening, too dapper, in appearance, clothes, and manners to suggest the genuine thing, and the girl before him scanned his face warily before replying. Then, very curtly, she answered lightly:

"Yes, I suppose I am . . . but what of it? Aren't we all a little worried?"

"Oh, I don't know," the man laughed cynically; "what's the use of being so miserable about the thing? We're all dying people, if it comes to that, so why get morbid about the whole affair? Besides, when people die . . . well, it's an ill wind, isn't it?"

Alaris stared at him stonily: there was an iciness about her regard which did not fail in effect.

"Oh, come, Miss Browne," he went on lightly. "Why be so hypocritical about it all? You know

. . . we all know, why we've been summoned here today . . . hopefully to hear his will."

"Well?"

Her voice was toneless.

"Well . . . isn't that only another way of saying that we've all come here to find out exactly what we've been left?"

"I consider that a very crude way of putting it."

The bitter voice of Kate Browne came acidly from the other side of the room.

"I'm sure I only wish my poor brother was alive to hear you. His only nephew . . . always so ready to do anything for him . . . such an uncalculating young man . . . so . . ."

"Now that's enough of that, Kate." It was the Colonel speaking. "For heaven's sake don't you start yapping. Of course we're all very sorry for Peter . . . but that's no reason why we shouldn't look at the matter in a businesslike way, is it, my dear?"

He addressed the last words to his wife, and with a start, as though her thoughts had taken her a long way distant, she answered him absently:

"Oh, I suppose so, Michael . . . I suppose so." She paused for a few seconds, and then, as if unable to resist the exclamation, she said wearily: "I do wish Mr. Yarrow would be quick and come, so that we can get this awful business over. Why is it that solicitors never can be punctual?"

"Awful business?"

Vivien Waugh laughed cynically and strolled to the window, his hands buried in his pockets, humming softly to himself.

The gate had swung open again and a tall figure moved briskly along the path. Alaris turned to the window, and a smile of pleasure flitted to her face, a smile which she banished instantly, but not before it had been curiously observed by two people within that room, two people who carefully pigeonholed the spectacle for future contemplation. The young man was whistling gently to himself as he approached, but as soon as he was within a few feet of the front door he stopped, as though a sudden realization that his demeanour was not entirely befitting the graveness of the occasion had just occurred to him.

"Mr. Paul Norman."

The little parlourmaid announced him and then vanished quickly.

Alaris rose to her feet and moved forward to welcome him, but now the worried frown had gone from her face: with the young man's coming her whole attitude had become more buoyant.

"You've been a long time, Paul," she said softly, and in her voice was a new note which had been entirely absent up to that moment.

"Yes." He turned to her after greeting the others. "Yes, I'm terribly sorry, Alaris. You see . . . I had rather a lot of things to get done first."

"Things very much more important, I suppose, than the mere reading of a will?"

The tones were acid: Kate Browne disliked all men, and especially all young men.

"No, not more important," he retorted lightly, "only entirely necessary. Well, Waugh," he went on quickly, "you're looking a bit peaked this morning. Not taking the old man's death to heart, are you?"

The other laughed.

"Hardly . . . can't say I've had much kindness from my uncle at any time. Rotten old skinflint. . . ."

"Please don't talk of him like that." Angela Browne had spoken quickly and her eyes were shining with unusual brightness: then, as though she realized that she had been a little too abrupt, she added slowly: "It's . . . it's such very bad taste, I think."

"Bad taste!" Paul Norman laughed. "Bad taste! . . . Well, it may be, but I'll make no bones about it; I'm jolly glad the old scoundrel's gone. He made everyone as unhappy as he possibly could . . . and as for Alaris! . . ."

He stopped and looked across at the girl meaningly.

"It's a lot of rot—all this sentiment," put in Waugh. "Why one's got to pretend that anyone, just because he is dead, is a stained-glass saint I can't think. . . ."

"Well," broke in Norman quickly, "I'll not make myself a hypocrite. . . . I hated the old man and I'm very glad he's gone. . . . I make no bones about it."

For the last few minutes the Colonel had been gradually assuming a saffron hue—talk of death had a habit of disturbing him unduly—and at last, rather like a bomb fuse already lit and vaguely apprehensive of the impending disintegration, the man blew up:

"Curry your bones," he said. "If you say that again I'll scream. . . ."

"Oh, no, you won't," Angela Browne spoke icily, "you'll roar . . . you know you always do."

The Colonel swung round and glared at her—it was very rarely now that his wife ever bothered to address to him a direct remark, and the occasion had a little disconcerted him.

"Now don't you——" he began, but a cry from Alaris stemmed his outburst.

"Thank heavens," she said fervently, "here's Mr. Yarrow coming at last."

The metallic clang of the gate sounded in their ears, and a second later the knocker was applied with a businesslike thoroughness.

Six pairs of eyes were fixed upon the door of the room as it swung gently open, and the new arrival paused for a moment upon the threshold.

George Yarrow entered the room. No one could possibly have mistaken this man's profession. It was stamped indelibly upon the parchment whiteness of his face, the beady, bright little eyes, the narrow, self-possessed lips: in the fussy briskness of his movements, the businesslike curtness of his voice.

There were no moments which George Yarrow enjoyed more than those wherein he could be as important as he felt, for George Yarrow was the big noise of Yarrow, Burton & Son. In fact, George Yarrow was

Yarrow, Burton & Son—Burton had lived only long enough to give the firm his name, and the "& Son" had so far been an optimistic fancy on the part of Mr. Yarrow.

"Well, well," said George Yarrow. "How do you do, Miss Alaris? How do you do, Colonel? How d'you do, everybody? Here we are, all gathered together. . . ."

He stopped. He coughed. He felt a little awkward. Somehow George Yarrow felt that this was not the opening which was really called for in the circumstances. To his annoyance the solicitor felt that he was about to blush, and that he was rapidly losing that pleasant feeling of power with which he had entered the room. He coughed again, a fine judicial cough, and this did much to restore his self-confidence.

"I have a sad duty to perform," he said.

But again he stopped, for he had caught the Colonel's eye. The expression in that eye seemed to imply that this also was not a suitable opening.

George Yarrow pulled a chair towards the table and sat down suddenly, placing the black dispatch case which he had brought with him within easy reach of his hand. He stared at it. It reminded him pleasantly of the office in which he spent his life and of his undoubted and unchallengeable position.

"There is no point in wasting time," he said. "If you are all ready I suggest that I should get to work at once and convey to you the terms of the late Mr. Browne's will."

"That's what we're here for," said the Colonel.

But something had to be done to subdue the expression in that eye, and Yarrow paid no attention to the remark of its owner.

He addressed Alaris.

"Is it your wish that I should start?"

"Please," she said.

"Very well, then. I may say that I have a surprise for you."

"Oh, Lord," said Waugh, "that's the way that all bad news starts."

George Yarrow smiled, a superior smile.

"I trust it will not be bad news," he said, "but I have no idea whether it is or not. You see, I have no idea of the contents of the will."

"Didn't you help him draw it up?"

The remark came in the acidulous tones of the dead man's sister.

"Yes—and no," said Mr. Yarrow. "I enabled him to draw it up, but I was not present when he did so, and I have no knowledge of how he has bequeathed his possessions. He wanted to tell you all about that himself."

"My brother made no attempt to," said the Colonel—"at least, not to my knowledge."

He looked round inquiringly at the others, and they signified their agreement.

"Oh, not during life," said Mr. Yarrow, inwardly delighted at the bombshell which he was about to burst in their midst, and relishing the effect that it would be certain to produce. "After his death."

For a moment there was a silence. And then Waugh's rather superior tones asked the question which all the people in that room were trying to formulate.

"Aren't you talking nonsense?" he inquired.

George Yarrow drew himself up slightly.

"Of course I am not." Then he smiled, a faint and horribly condescending smile. "But I agree that on the face of it my statement would appear to be very much akin to it."

"Pure bilge," said the Colonel.

"You see," continued Mr. Yarrow, rather startled, "my client had his own method of doing this. He wanted to tell you all exactly what he thought of you—I am using his own words—and precisely what he had left to you, and for this purpose he made a record, my instructions being that this record should be played to you upon this occasion."

"A record?"

"Yes," said Mr. Yarrow, turning towards the Colonel's wife, "yes . . . a record . . . a gramophone record."

"Then," said Kate Browne tartly, "we are going to hear his voice?"

"Yes," said Mr. Yarrow, "yes—that's what I've been trying to tell you."

He was a little irritated. So far the effect of his bombshell did not seem to be as devastating as he had hoped, but almost immediately his anticipations were gratified.

"I can't stand that!"

It was Alaris who had spoken, and in her voice there had sounded a note of real alarm. Paul Norman moved over to her quickly and sat upon the arm of the chair in which she was seated.

"My dear," he said gently, "he can't hurt you . . . now."

"Oh, I know," said Alaris, "I know, but it's such a horrible idea. He's dead . . . and yet we're going to hear his voice."

"The most disgusting thing I've ever heard," put in Kate Browne bitterly.

"Outrageous, positively outrageous."

The Colonel's voice was almost unintelligible.

"Disgraceful!" "Abominable!" "Quite ghoulish!"

The remarks were flung about the room like bullets from a gun, but with a businesslike detachment George Yarrow broke in upon the babel.

"I am very sorry," he said, "but these are my instructions. Of course, I can't make you stay in this room and listen to what my late client desired to tell you. On the other hand, I can only say that this is your sole means of obtaining the information which you are gathered here to obtain. In other words, of finding out the terms of my client's will."

There was a long silence. Yarrow sat back in his chair and watched the obvious battle that was raging within each one gathered in that room.

It was the Colonel who spoke finally for those assembled.

"Well," he said, "if we must we must. I think it is a loathsome idea, but typical of my brother. It's no good trying to mince matters. . . . I never did get on with him in life, and I find that I don't agree with him now after death. Put the damn thing on!"

George Yarrow rose to his feet and opened his dispatch case. From it he withdrew a black shiny disc. Paul Norman, sitting close to Alaris, felt her fingers close suddenly upon his arm. He looked down at her. The girl was strangely white. He let his left hand close over her fingers.

"It's all right, Alaris, it's all right."

"Oh, I hate it."

She was speaking to him alone, very softly.

"I hate it. I can't bear to hear his voice again. I thought that at last I was rid of it."

"I know . . . I know."

He spoke comfortingly. The girl was evidently very near to hysteria. "But don't be silly, Alaris. Anyway, I'm here now, and, by God! he can't separate us any more."

"Can't he?"

She looked up at him. There was an expression in her eyes which he had not seen before, an expression of fear, fear of something which he could not quite understand.

"Can't he?" she repeated.

"Of course he can't."

Paul Norman spoke quickly, rather gruffly, in a tone foreign to that which he usually unconsciously used towards the girl, but he felt that she was being very unreasonable, even although he realized the strain through which she had passed and the overwhelming hatred which she had been compelled to keep so carefully concealed throughout the years in all her dealings with her legal guardian.

Suddenly Alaris looked down quickly.

"I *hate* it," she cried. "I can't stand it. *Stop!*"

George Yarrow, who had reached the instrument, turned round at once. Everyone in the room was looking at Alaris, everyone in the room, their nerves keyed up to stand the grim prospect, was annoyed with her for delaying the inevitable.

"Come, come, my girl." The Colonel spoke sharply. "Let's get the beastly ordeal over."

"One would think," said Miss Browne, with acid sweetness, "that you had been fond of my brother."

Something in these words had the desired effect upon the girl. She stiffened. Paul Norman, seated beside her, could feel it. She withdrew her hand from his.

"Very well," she said. "I am sorry. Put it on."

George Yarrow smiled. He went once more to the instrument. He placed the disc in position and laboriously, meticulously, he wound up the machine. Then, taking a new needle from the box close at hand, he inserted this and started the instrument.

Everyone stood rigid: everyone stared as though turned to stone; waiting . . . waiting for the record to begin. The tension in that room became acute as second after second passed and yet the needle scratched lightly over the surface of the disc, emitting nothing but a whirring noise. Was it all a hoax?—a macabre attempt at humour on the part of the dead man? For a moment the thought occurred to more than one of those assembled, but for a moment only, for with a startling clearness, an electric suddenness which stiffened the listening people to an utter immobility, the needle touched to life the hidden message and the dead man spoke:

"If George Yarrow has done his work I am now talking to my brother and his wife, my sister, my adopted daughter and her lover . . ."

Alaris moaned slightly, but at once Paul Norman pressed her fingers reassuringly.

". . . also my nephew. You know that I am dead—well, let me tell you this . . . there can be no possible doubt that I have been murdered. . . ."

A scream, startling and almost uncanny, rang through the room. Angela Browne, her face drawn and white, screamed again, and the sound was more than a little unmanning.

George Yarrow, his hands shaking visibly, the parchment tint of his face considerably more pronounced, slipped the needle swiftly from the disc and stopped the instrument. Then, turning to the woman whose sudden outburst had contributed a further shock to that already supplied by the altogether unexpected and appalling contents of the dial, he frowned at her angrily, his voice shaking audibly as he spoke.

"If you please, Mrs. Browne," he said gruffly, "we must have silence . . . this . . . this is very terrible . . . quite unprecedented . . . I . . ."

"For God's sake try not to behave like an hysterical girl . . . you're old enough."

The Colonel had turned to his wife viciously, and, wiping her eyes with a trembling hand, she nodded miserably.

"I . . . I'm sorry . . . it was . . . rather a shock . . . please go on. . . ."

No one else had spoken, but at these words Vivien Waugh, all the confidence shorn from his demeanour, nodded curtly:

"Put it on."

Again there came that agony of waiting . . . the scraping of the needle upon the unrecorded portion of the disc . . . and then again the dead man's voice, determined, measured, entirely dispassionate and cool:

"If George Yarrow has done his work I am now talking to my brother and his wife, my sister, my adopted daughter and her lover, also my nephew. You know that I am dead—well, let me tell you this . . . there can be no possible doubt that I have been murdered. . . ."

A sound like that of a pistol shot crashed through the room, there was a clatter of breaking glass, and some hard object thudded through the window and fell noisily upon the floor.

CHAPTER IV

ANGELA BROWNE started to scream again, and she did it with a thoroughness that could only come from hysteria. The Colonel swore lustily, but his words were lost in the cataract of high-pitched sound which came from his wife, which, in view of his experience in India, was perhaps fortunate.

But no one else in that room was capable of speech or sound of any sort. They stood or sat in whatever position they had occupied when the crash had come, staring at the shattered pane of glass in the window, staring from that again to the small round white object which lay there in the middle of the floor, and it took them some little time before their scattered senses fully appreciated the fact that this object was not a wicked machine fashioned by the devil straight from hell, but was, in fact, nothing more disturbing than one of the less expensive makes of golf balls. In that moment no one realized that the record which had so shattered their peace of mind, coming so unexpectedly like some grim present from the past, had ceased; all their attention was focussed on the object which had so rudely broken their appointment with the voice of death. The first person to realize this fact was George Yarrow, who, himself, had been responsible; for, automatically, as the second interruption had come, he had lifted the needle from the record and had stopped the machine.

Angela Browne stopped screaming suddenly, and the Colonel, whose vocabulary had given out some moments previously, remained of necessity silent, since he could find no normal words to meet the situation. The passage of quite an appreciable time remained scarcely noticed by the inmates of that room, as their eyes were riveted on that inoffensive golf ball which had so excited their imagination and shattered their nerves. Yarrow was the first to recover himself sufficiently to move. He left the vicinity of the gramophone and walked over, with short decisive steps, to where the golf ball lay on the thick carpet.

Very gingerly he took it up, turned it over between his fingers, examined it with a care which he might have given to an unexploded but fully primed Mills bomb. And as he was standing there, the others watching him, still suffering from a sort of stupefied silence, a figure appeared behind the shattered glass of the window, and Mr. Malcolm raised his cap.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am," he said—"a most regrettable performance. I've never been a good golfer, but I have sunk today to depths which in my wildest nightmares I have never reached. The worst shot of my career—and perhaps the most expensive."

He looked round at the people assembled, all of whom were staring at him as if his sudden appearance were the apparition of a ghost.

"Alaris, I'm terribly sorry. I'll go straight down and tell old Mundy to come up and repair this window at once. I will, of course, pay the bill." He hesitated. "By the way, was the ball found?"

Still all those people in that room remained quite silent, staring at him, hanging on his words, wondering, even, whether Mr. Malcolm were true. Mr. Malcolm had no doubt upon the matter, but he seemed to catch the tension of that room, for he looked round quickly.

"Ah, Mr. Yarrow. With the ball, I think."

For a moment more he hesitated, then, stepping through the window, taking great care to avoid the jagged ends of glass, he walked up to the solicitor.

"Thank you so much."

He held out his hand. He took the ball from Yarrow's nerveless fingers. He looked at it thoughtfully.

"Funny," he said. "I should have thought it would have been more injured. I'm glad it's not."

He put it in his pocket. Still no one in that room seemed to be able to say a word, and Mr. Malcolm, a faint look of astonishment on his face, surveyed those present. His glance came to rest on young Paul Norman.

"Oh, Norman! You would have been amazed at that shot. From the fourth tee, my dear fellow. I must have hit it off the very toe of my driver. Right off the face altogether. Alaris, my dear, you are not annoyed with me?"

Alaris suddenly laughed: it was a dangerous laugh, a laugh which to any doctor's ears would have sounded ominous and would have made him act. Paul Norman, possibly because of the deep understanding which ran between himself and the girl, realized this fact and turned to her quickly. But she had recovered control over herself, and, giving him a fleeting smile, she rose to her feet.

"Mr. Malcolm," she said, "you must forgive us."

"Forgive you, my dear?" Mr. Malcolm now appeared really astonished. "But I've come to apologize!"

"No," said Alaris firmly. "You must forgive us. We owe you an apology because we . . . well, because we . . ."

She stopped. She looked round the room helplessly: she had no idea of what to say. No one in that room assisted her: their attitude had undergone a subtle change. From mere astonishment, from almost superstitious fear, they had altered abruptly almost to anger at this uncalled-for interruption. Keyed up as they were, their nerves already overwrought by the suddenness with which this grim message had been sprung upon them, they were ready to believe the equally sudden advent of this window-smashing object a thing of like significance. But the gradual realization that this was no phantom from another world, but merely the badly aimed shot of an appalling golfer, strained their nerves to the point of snapping. A dull anger succeeded their fear, an anger which only increased as it became apparent that this silly man seemed in no haste to make his departure.

The only person who did not hesitate was Mr. Malcolm. He walked over to the girl and took one of her hands in his own.

"My dear," he said, "what's the matter? You look ill."

"I'm not ill," she said, but her voice did not carry conviction.

"You are ill," said Mr. Malcolm promptly.

"I am not ill," repeated Alaris, and something in her tone warned Mr. Malcolm that he was not to pursue the subject.

"You are not ill," said Mr. Malcolm, "but you are definitely worried."

"Yes," said Alaris, "I am worried."

Mr. Malcolm did not let go of her hand, but he did look round the room, and he gave no sign as to whether he knew the identity of those around him to whom he had not as yet spoken.

"Something very unpleasant has happened," said Mr. Malcolm. He said it definitely, as if he were stating a fact, a positive fact about which there could be no argument. "I, by my footling efforts in the links, have butted in. I am sorry."

He turned once more to Alaris.

"My dear," he said, "if I can be of any help you have only to let me know."

He pressed her fingers, which he had been holding all the time, and turned towards the window. He reached it: he turned and faced those in the room.

"I am so sorry," he said, "so very sorry."

But just as he was about to leave that house in the way in which he had entered it, Alaris stopped him with a gesture.

"Don't go, Mr. Malcolm."

There was a direct appeal in her voice, an appeal which a man far less susceptible to a pretty face than was Mr. Malcolm could not have refused. He stood where he was and looked at her.

George Yarrow, who had been watching the scene in rather a dazed manner, suddenly recovered his senses. His feeling of power had temporarily quite deserted him, and he now felt that he was being rather badly treated by circumstances over which he could not possibly have been expected to have any control, but the reason did not matter to him. The fact remained and was displeasing. He felt that it was high time that he made some further contribution to the conversation, that he made some effort to regain that position of importance which had so pleasantly rested upon his shoulders such a very short time before.

"I think," he said, "that Mr. Malcolm had better leave. There is, after all, no good in delaying the unpleasant task before us any more than is necessary."

Alaris turned on him, and she turned on him with eyes in which there was more than a hint of anger.

"I don't propose to delay what is before us," she said quietly, "but I should like Mr. Malcolm to be present."

"Why?" said Vivien Waugh.

For the first time Mr. Malcolm seemed to notice this young man. He looked at him earnestly, but there was nothing in his expression which could in any way be construed as resentment for the insulting intonation of the single word, or the type of man which was Vivien Waugh. He merely seemed to stare at him impersonally, possibly registering an impression, but conveying no slightest inkling as to its nature.

"Why?" said Alaris. "I'll tell you why. Something very unpleasant, something very horrible has happened to us. I would like . . . I would like very much that Mr. Malcolm, whose sudden appearance among us may or may not be the will of God, but is sufficiently astonishing to . . . to . . ."

"Do you know," said Mr. Malcolm, perhaps realizing that the girl was in difficulties—"do you know, I'm curious. What *is* all this?"

George Yarrow seized the opportunity.

"You know who I am, Mr. Malcolm?"

Mr. Malcolm smiled.

"But, of course, my dear fellow."

"Let me introduce you to those whom you don't know in this room. The Colonel and Mrs. Browne—

brother and sister-in-law to the late owner of this house: Miss Browne—his sister: Mr. Waugh—his nephew . . . and I"—George Yarrow puffed himself out slightly—"the late Mr. Browne's legal adviser."

"Ah!" said Mr. Malcolm, "the reading of the will!"

He said it almost ingenuously, much as a child might give the answer to a riddle, with delighted satisfaction.

"No," said the solicitor. "No. Not the *reading* of the will . . ."

"Shut up," said the Colonel.

He advanced a few steps into the middle of the room: it was evident that he intended to take the stage.

"I cannot see," he said, "why a perfect stranger, because of an accident entirely his own fault, should be allowed to interrupt this most important meeting."

"Neither can I," said Mr. Malcolm. "I'll go at once."

"No," said Alaris again. "You don't understand, Uncle. Mr. Malcolm was an old friend of your brother's, and dined here quite often. Mr. Malcolm has been a great friend to me and a very good one. I think I'd like him to stay."

"But," the Colonel exploded, "what on earth has he got to do with this matter?"

"Nothing at all," said Alaris, "except that he may help me. I should feel safer if he were here."

"Safer?"

The word came, in rather a hurt tone, from Paul Norman. She turned to him and rested her hand on his arm.

"Yes, Paul. You know Mr. Malcolm, too. I . . . I'd like him to stay."

There was a pause. Alaris had caught the Colonel's eye and was staring him out defiantly. It was evident that the Colonel had no wish that Mr. Malcolm should remain. But it was Vivien Waugh who finally decided the matter.

"Consider the point, Colonel. This Mr. Malcolm has burst in upon us most unexpectedly and at a most inopportune moment, and he has caught us all unawares. Please don't think, though"—he turned to Mr. Malcolm with an unctuous grace which the Colonel noticed with disapproval—"that I am blaming you for this intrusion. Your disability at golf you no doubt regret as much as I do. But on the other hand"—he turned again to the Colonel—"this gentleman must realize by now that something very much out of the usual is going on in this room, and even if we might swear him to secrecy, it is, I think, possibly a little unfair, if—as Alaris has told us—he was an old friend of my late uncle. He must have been about the only one! Perhaps there is no reason why he shouldn't stay with us to the end. After all, if he knew what it was all about, he would be less likely to talk about it."

The Colonel hesitated.

"Yes," he said, "there's something in that."

Alaris turned to them suddenly.

"I think you are all being beastly," she cried. "Mr. Malcolm shall stay or go just as he likes."

"Oh, no," said Mr. Malcolm, "just as you like, my dear."

There was a pause. No one said a word. Mr. Malcolm remained watching the clear-cut profile of the girl as she stood hesitating. Then she turned.

"I'd like you to stay," she said.

"Very well," replied Mr. Malcolm.

And forthwith he sat down in a chair.

"Well," said George Yarrow, "as this thing has been decided and as we now have an additional member to the . . . er . . . as Mr. Malcolm is now going to stay, I think we should tell him what has happened."

"No!"

The acid tones of Miss Browne's voice came in quick response.

"We have had a shock—why shouldn't he? He knows as much as we did when we entered this room today. Put the thing on."

Mr. Yarrow hesitated.

"I concur," said the Colonel harshly.

"Very well," said Yarrow.

He moved over once more to the instrument and took up the sound box preparatory to placing it upon the disc. As he did so an expression of startled astonishment came over his face. He stared almost unbelievingly at the instrument, then turning, and in a voice which was far more autocratic than any which he could have purposely adopted, he discharged his thunderbolt.

"Who has taken the record?" he asked.

CHAPTER V

JUST for a moment there was a stupefied silence. Then, as if with one accord, all the persons seated in that room, with the exception of Mr. Malcolm, rose to their feet and moved quickly over to the gramophone. Mr. Malcolm remained where he was, watching with interest the almost feverish excitement which seemed to be displayed towards the gramophone, himself entirely unnoticed by those people to whom this new event appeared so strangely momentous. They were all talking at once, and for some time it was difficult for Mr. Malcolm to distinguish from the various snatches of conversation which he heard what had happened. But by degrees something of the facts of the case came to his alert brain, just as George Yarrow at last reëstablished some sort of order.

It was a very different George Yarrow who was now taking charge. He was startled, visibly startled. He had been disturbed out of his normal mediocrity, but the training which he had received in his profession stood him in good stead, even in the excitement which it was obvious he was feeling. Actually the mind of George Yarrow was in turmoil. He resented this new, unexpected, and unpleasing development. It seemed to him that he had been wronged by the whole series of circumstances which had occurred ever since he had entered that house. He was displeased and he showed it.

"You will all sit down," he said.

Something in his voice quelled the noisy exclamations of amazement which were coming from all those around him. For a second or two they stood still staring at the angry little man, but then, obeying some instinct which the majesty of the law always seems to exact even through the medium of its most unimposing member, they did as they were bidden.

"The person who has removed this record," said George Yarrow, "will kindly return it at once."

"What record?" said Mr. Malcolm.

Immediately seven startled heads were turned in his direction, but Mr. Malcolm did not flinch or bat an eyelid. He remained staring at George Yarrow.

"What record?" he repeated.

Was it out of mischief that he did this thing, or was it purely that he had no idea of what was happening? George Yarrow could not decide. But he was still very angry, and he showed it.

"Shut up," he said. "Quick, now. Whoever took that record bring it back."

There was a dead silence in the room. George Yarrow once again began to feel uncomfortable. What could he do? Supposing the person who had removed the record refused to return it or to disclose what had become of it? The solicitor racked his brain for some method by which he might enforce his will. Suddenly Vivien Waugh laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh, and coming abruptly into the dead silence which had followed the solicitor's last words, it jarred upon the nerves of all those present.

"Poor Mr. Malcolm!" he said quietly.

"I agree," said Mr. Malcolm. "What's all this about?"

Subconsciously everyone in that room suddenly realized that Mr. Malcolm was the dominating personality amongst them. They all turned and looked at him again. And this time Mr. Malcolm decided to act.

"It was evident to me," he said, "a short time ago that I intruded into a family gathering at which something had gone wrong. At first it occurred to me that the late Mr. Browne had bequeathed his money outside the family, but this is not sufficient to explain the curious attitude that all of you seem to adopt towards that gramophone. I have been asked to stay, and now stay I shall. Will somebody please explain exactly what has happened?"

"Look here," said George Yarrow, "look here. This has nothing to do with you. I didn't want you to stay, and I wish you hadn't."

"I'm staying," said Mr. Malcolm shortly.

Vivien Waugh laughed again.

"Quite the Napoleon," he said.

Mr. Malcolm paid to him no attention whatsoever.

But an attack of a more direct nature was about to be made upon him. The Colonel advanced threateningly across the room.

"Now look here, sir," he said, "I don't know who you are, except that I am told you were a friend of my brother's. You have most unexpectedly burst in upon us at a time when none of us wish to see you."

"Is that quite right?" interrupted Mr. Malcolm.

Alaris took her cue.

"No, it isn't," she said. "I want you to be here. I want you to know all about it."

Paul Norman hesitated, but only for a moment.

"And so do I," he said.

The Colonel fumed. He did not like to have his will flouted, but a loophole occurred to him.

"Well," he said, "that's two out of six. I think that the majority would prefer you to leave, sir."

"How do you make that out?" said Vivien Waugh.

"Just these two," spluttered the Colonel, "against you and me, my wife, and my sister."

"Oh, no," said Vivien Waugh. "I think Mr. Malcolm rather fun. I'd like him to stay."

"Three all," said Mr. Malcolm.

The Colonel sighed just like a child's balloon might sigh when pricked with a pin. He stayed for a moment undecided, then turned abruptly on his heel, muttered some strange oaths to himself, and returned to his seat.

"But, on the other hand," went on Vivien Waugh, "Mr. Malcolm has produced an impasse. Three all

—as he said. There is no majority there. Perhaps . . . ah, yes," he looked round suddenly at the solicitor, "perhaps Mr. Yarrow will decide."

"Decide?" said Mr. Yarrow. "Decide? What am I to decide? This is your affair. All that I must see to is that my late client's wishes are carried out, if that be possible. This record has vanished during Mr. Malcolm's unexpected appearance. Whoever took it must return it at once."

"Why?" said Alaris. "I didn't take it, but I'm glad."

All eyes once more were turned upon her.

The Colonel exploded.

"What is there to be glad about?" he cried. "I agree that the experience was unpleasant, especially in view of the words that we heard, but, on the other hand, how are we to know how my brother wished his effects to be disposed of if this record is lost?"

"Ah!" said Mr. Malcolm, "so that's it!"

He smiled benignly.

"I don't think there's any more point in your going on talking, for the moment. I thought I should get the truth if I let you talk a bit. Let me tell you what I have gathered, and you can correct me if I am wrong."

He smiled again and looked around at the expectant faces. There was a hostile look on every one of them, except on that of the girl who had asked him to remain. She was looking at him with her lips half opened, hanging on his words, relying on him implicitly. Mr. Malcolm gave her a special little smile, a reassuring little smile.

"As I understand it from the snatches which I have managed to overhear—a matter which has not been difficult—Mr. Browne made a record before his death, which he proposed that Mr. Yarrow should play to you. Just as you were starting to listen to it —I think I am right in saying that you heard a few words—my appalling effort from the fourth tee rudely shattered your quiet. I followed my ball, and I was to receive the unpleasant shock of hearing a dead man's voice when you put on the record. But the record has gone. Well, let us get at a few of the salient facts. When was the record last seen?"

"I put it on the gramophone myself," said Yarrow.

He had given up all hope now of controlling the situation, and he was rather glad, for obviously it was well beyond him; as gracefully as he could he handed over the reins to Mr. Malcolm, who evidently was rushing in where the angel, in himself, feared to tread.

"And you stayed by the gramophone when my ball crashed through the window?"

"I did," said Yarrow.

"No, you didn't," said Mr. Malcolm. "You can't have. You were standing over here with my ball in your hand when I arrived through the window." He laughed. "Please, Mr. Yarrow, don't think I am being purposely rude just for the sake of being rude, but we are faced with something which is very strange and therefore it is essential that we should all collect our thoughts, and in this reassembling of the facts as they occurred—which is the only thing that can help us—we must be very careful not to be inaccurate."

"I beg your pardon," said Yarrow, crestfallen, "but I did stand here for a moment."

"Yes, no doubt, while you recovered from the shock. And the rest of you—what did you do?"

The Colonel took it upon himself to answer for all of them.

"Stayed rooted to the spot," he said. "It was . . . well, it was a shock."

"It must have been," said Mr. Malcolm pleasantly, "a most unpleasing shock. Well, then, I appeared at the window: I claimed my ball." Subconsciously Mr. Malcolm's hand moved to his pocket. "I got it: I apologized: I was about to leave: I was stopped. Here I am. During that time the record disappeared?"

"Yes," said Yarrow quickly, "yes, that's it."

"Well, it can't have walked away," said Mr. Malcolm, "and nobody else came into the room, so somebody here must have removed it."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Yarrow—"yes, yes."

"Why?" said Mr. Malcolm thoughtfully. "Why should anyone wish to remove it?"

Vivien Waugh laughed shortly.

"That," he said, "would be obvious to you, Mr. Malcolm, had you heard the start of the record, just as we did."

"Ah!" said Mr. Malcolm. "I thought that must be the explanation. Well, can anybody tell me . . . ?"

The acid tones of Miss Browne suddenly broke in most unexpectedly.

"I'll tell you," she said. "My brother's voice came to us in rather a grim manner and told us that he had been murdered."

She stopped.

"Yes?" encouraged Mr. Malcolm softly.

"And that's all," said Miss Browne.

"Is that all there was on the record?" said Mr. Malcolm.

"Oh, no." It was the Colonel who spoke. "We have no idea what came after that. That was just the beginning, but the moment that he mentioned murder my wife here got hysterics. . . ."

"And I removed the needle from the record," said Yarrow, anxious to help.

"I see," said Mr. Malcolm; "and then?"

"I stopped screaming almost at once," said Angela Browne.

"Good for you!" said Mr. Malcolm. "And then?"

"I put the needle on the record again," said Yarrow.

"And what did you hear?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"Exactly the same thing."

Once again Miss Browne was speaking.

"And why no more this time?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"Because your blasted ball, sir," said the Colonel, "crashed through that window and made enough noise to frighten a whole regiment."

"Oh," said Mr. Malcolm. "I'm so sorry, so awfully sorry."

But he said it very thoughtfully, and it was evident that he was not in the least thinking of what he was saying.

A slight frown made its appearance on his forehead, and again Mr. Malcolm half closed his eyes so that the rather long lashes almost met. For quite an appreciable time Mr. Malcolm remained silent, and not one of the others in that room, anxious though they were to continue the discussion and to conclude the awkward scene, dared to interrupt his thoughts. They all watched him, but again Alaris was the only one who showed by her expression any sort of sympathy with the intruder.

Then, just as suddenly as he had fallen into his brown study, Mr. Malcolm came out of it. There was a bright, almost a mischievous, glint in his eye. He looked around, he looked at all the faces watching him so closely, and he smiled.

"What a nuisance I have been!" he said.

No one verbally agreed with him, but it was fairly obvious to Mr. Malcolm that at least six of those before him would have been more than willing to do so.

"I have a question to ask," suddenly said Mr. Malcolm. "Why are you all so disturbed over this record?"

"Why?" the Colonel exploded. "Good heavens, man! Surely it's obvious when my brother's voice comes almost from the grave and tells us that he has been murdered."

"But I thought," interrupted Mr. Malcolm, his voice still perfectly even, "I thought that the Coroner's Jury had returned a verdict of 'Suicide whilst temporarily insane'?"

"Yes," said Vivien Waugh, "that was the verdict."

He said it rather shortly: his voice sounded a little more precise than usual. It seemed to have lost some of the affected drawling tone in which he normally spoke. He was watching Mr. Malcolm closely, very closely, and Mr. Malcolm was not slow to notice this fact.

"Well," said Mr. Malcolm, "if that is so, what is the importance of this record?"

"I don't understand."

It was Alaris who spoke.

"My dear," said Mr. Malcolm, turning to her and devoting to her his entire attention, "the late Mr. Browne—so the jury tells us—was mad. As a matter of fact, it so happens that I have seen the doctor, his doctor, since the inquest. He tells me a thing which you must know even if these others don't, that Mr. Browne was suffering very severely from nerves.

In fact, he might be said to have been suffering from a mania, a persecution mania. He thought that at every turn someone was out to do him harm, violent physical harm. This was all brought out in the evidence at the Coroner's Court."

"Yes," said Mr. Yarrow. "I was there. I heard the doctor say it."

Mr. Malcolm turned towards the latest speaker.

"And you also heard him imply, no doubt," he said, "that the deceased had been mad—had suffered from this neurotic mania—for some considerable time. It is, therefore, I think, a perfectly reasonable supposition to come to, that the deceased was mad, not merely at the moment when he took his life, but also for some months beforehand."

"Yes," said Vivien Waugh quickly, "yes, I see that."

"Very well, then," went on Mr. Malcolm. "Why be so worried over this record? His action when he killed himself was that of a madman: his action when he made this record, presumably, was also that of a madman. Why worry?"

"That's true," said the Colonel, "very true."

"Do you mean to say"—the querulous tones of Miss Browne came once more to Mr. Malcolm's ears, sounded almost as if she were disappointed that the gruesome scene at which she had just been present was of no significance—"do you mean to say that we needn't have gone through all this strain?"

"Well," said Mr. Malcolm, "I don't know. I can well understand all your feelings at the most unexpected turn of events, and of course my sudden and somewhat odd advent into the room, especially in view of the tense state of your nerves at the moment, added to the ominous tableau. But I am not sure that one need worry so very much about the actual fact."

"Wait a minute." The Colonel spoke quickly. "Wait a minute now. This is all very well, but in that record, presumably, my brother was about to tell us how he wished his possessions to be disposed. Well, what are we going to do now?"

"If a madman makes a will," said Mr. Malcolm, "I am no legal adviser, but I understand that it is not considered valid. So that it really doesn't matter, Colonel. Nothing matters, in fact."

"Well, what are we going to do?" said the Colonel.

Mr. Malcolm turned towards George Yarrow.

"I understand," he said, "that in similar circumstances all that can be done, provided there is no previous will, is to prove that the person concerned has died intestate."

"That is so," said George Yarrow, "but it is up to anybody who may dispute a will made by a supposed madman to prove his madness."

"Oh, I see," said Mr. Malcolm, "so it would have been a good idea had we heard the record?"

"A very good idea," said George Yarrow shortly.

"But since it has gone," said Mr. Malcolm—"well, it really doesn't matter, does it? It wouldn't if the man was mad . . . well, then, let's assume that the man was mad."

Miss Browne rose to her feet. She was closely followed by Angela, the Colonel's wife.

"If that is so," said Miss Browne, "let's leave this beastly room at once. The sooner I leave this house the better pleased I shall be. I never expected anything from my brother, in any case: I haven't spoken to him in twenty years. I hoped never to hear his voice again, but he forced it upon me by this grim jest of insanity. I propose to go."

Angela Browne turned towards her husband.

"I think I agree, dear, don't you? There's nothing that we can do now."

She was speaking quickly, anxiously, almost imploring her husband to fall in with her suggestion.

Vivien Waugh rose to his feet.

"I suppose you're right, sir," he said. "I must say"—he turned to Alaris—"I think the fact that you made Mr. Malcolm stay has been an excellent idea and has worked out well for all of us."

The Colonel seemed to be hesitating.

Paul Norman rose to his feet. He did not wish to go, but since the others were departing he supposed that it could not be avoided.

But the only person who appeared disturbed was George Yarrow.

"But . . ."

Mr. Malcolm put out his hand.

"Please, Mr. Yarrow. I think you had better all sit down. It is not so simple as all that, you know. You see, had no one removed that record the whole thing would have been quite as simple as I have said; but as someone did, someone must have been afraid of what it might have disclosed. *Perhaps the late Mr. Browne was not so mad!*"

CHAPTER VI

MR. MALCOLM sat back in his chair and smiled around blandly, noting the various expressions on the faces before him. In the Colonel's eyes there was nothing but blank astonishment, but there was a definite resentment at this last curbing of their liberty on the faces of both the Colonel's wife and of Miss Kate Browne. Yet to Angela Browne there came immediately a feeling of resignation. She had longed to depart from that room, but she saw now that prevention was inevitable, and she sat down again in her chair submissively. Vivien Waugh was frowning heavily, but evidently he thought better of any expostulation, and he also sat down. Not so Kate Browne, however.

"You have been making fun of us, sir," she said.

"Oh, no," said Mr. Malcolm; "how can you say that?"

"You have, sir." The crabbed spinster was not to be put off. "You know you have."

"I know nothing of the sort," mildly interjected Mr. Malcolm.

"Oh, yes, you do. You led us on to suppose that we needn't stay in this foul house any longer, and all you have been doing is trying to make us talk . . . to make . . ."

"Please, Miss Browne." Mr. Malcolm spoke now with that note of authority in his voice which had so far quelled any sign of rebellion on the part of all those about him, and had made them submit to his will. "I have not made you talk. I have listened to your perfectly voluntary contributions. If I have prematurely led you to suppose that this meeting was over, I am sorry."

Vivien Waugh laughed, a displeasing laugh, but he added no words in support of it.

Mr. Malcolm gave him but a cursory glance out of the corner of his eye, and then continued to deal with the dead man's sister.

"Please sit down, Miss Browne," he said. "You know we can't yet break up this meeting. You see, this has suddenly become a serious matter. Had no one interfered with that record, then we should have heard it to the end, and anything which we might have heard could without doubt and with the support of the doctor's evidence and the verdict of the Coroner's Jury have been treated as the ravings of a madman. But this record has disappeared almost certainly because someone in this room was apprehensive of what might be said in it. I mentioned before that gramophone records are not capable of movement by themselves. Someone in this room has taken that record, and that someone must now put it back."

There was a dead silence, which was broken, after a second or two, by the gentle swishing of a silken gown, as Miss Kate Browne seated herself once more; but no one spoke a word.

Mr. Malcolm continued to stare blandly at the others before him, noting their different ways of registering discomfort. He gave them a full minute, but at the end of that time, when it was clear that his words had borne no fruit and his request had not been answered, he rose to his feet.

"Well, since the person who removed that record is not going to return it," he said quietly, "I think I ought to say this much. Unexpectedly to hear again the voice of a dead man is a most startling thing to have happened, and I have nothing but disapproval of the man who thought of such an idea. In itself, it is quite sufficient to have made the person who has taken that record fall, in a moment of repulsion, to the urge of removing it. Therefore, I don't think any of us will think very much worse of him if he now returns it, providing, of course, that we are all determined—as I think we are—not to mention any of the events that have happened in this room once we have left it."

Mr. Malcolm looked round expectantly.

Vivien Waugh fidgeted uncomfortably. Paul Norman seemed to be looking round quickly at the others, anxious not to let them observe his scrutiny, yet trying to probe what he could of their thoughts from the expressions on their faces. The Colonel coughed and cleared his throat noisily and got rather red in the face. The Colonel's wife closed her eyes: Mr. Malcolm suddenly thought that she must be very near to hysteria again. Kate Browne was the only one who remained entirely stolid and indifferent, for Alaris, when Mr. Malcolm looked at her, had lost every vestige of colour and was sitting in her chair almost in a trance, staring straight in front of her. George Yarrow, who had moved over now to the dispatch case on the table, which he had left to place the record on the gramophone, was fidgeting with its lock, and darting little sharp glances towards Mr. Malcolm.

"Well, well," said Mr. Malcolm. "I'm sorry, but since nobody has accepted the loophole which I have offered him or her, then I think there is only one thing to be done. Eh, Mr. Yarrow?"

"And what is that?" said the little solicitor quickly.

"Why, look for it, look for the record, of course," said Mr. Malcolm.

Again there was a silence, but this time Mr. Malcolm sensed a special tension in the air. He smiled to himself a trifle grimly. But his attention was abruptly drawn to Paul Norman. The young man had been very retiring throughout the scene, and had said scarcely anything. Now that he was about to do so, he seemed to find some difficulty in formulating his words.

"If . . . if somebody is going to look for it," he said hesitatingly, "who is?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Mr. Malcolm.

"Who is going to look for it, I mean."

"Yes," said Vivien Waugh, "yes—that's the point."

"What are you getting at?" asked the Colonel.

"Well," said Paul Norman, "I mean . . . if we decide upon one of us to look for it, and that person happens to be the one who took the record, then, of course, it . . ."

"Won't be found," finished Mr. Malcolm. "Quite true."

Mr. Yarrow coughed. He did not cough because he wanted to cough: he coughed to draw attention to himself. He had something to say.

"I might venture to suggest," he said, "that there is only one person in this room, not including myself, who could not possibly have taken the record."

"I wondered who'd see that first," murmured Mr. Malcolm, but he said it so low that it was only Alaris who could catch the words.

"Who d'you mean?" asked the Colonel.

"Obviously," said George Yarrow—"obviously Mr. Malcolm. He came into the room when the record was in place on the gramophone, and from the moment that he entered until the moment when I discovered that the record had gone, I scarcely took my eyes off him. I don't think anybody else did, either."

"Except the person who took the record," said the Colonel.

"Of course," said George Yarrow irritably, "of course. But I agree with Mr. Norman's objection, and I think we should decide that Mr. Malcolm should look for the record."

"What do the rest of you say?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

Just for a second no one spoke, then the drawling tones of Vivien Waugh made themselves heard.

"Oh, yes, I suppose it's the best way, but it's all damn unpleasant."

Mr. Malcolm did not wait for any further acquiescence. He promptly started on his search, and a methodical search it was. There were one or two loose records on a table near the gramophone, and these he looked through carefully. He looked along the shelves of books: he looked under chairs and in every corner, with a thoroughness which yet did not delay the rapidity of his actions. He examined everything all round that room, while seven pairs of eyes watched his every movement in a breathless suspense.

But finally Mr. Malcolm returned to his own chair, sat down and, taking his handkerchief, carefully wiped the perspiration from his brow, for Mr. Malcolm was not accustomed to such violent exercise indoors, and the day was a hot one. Mr. Malcolm, apparently, had seen no sign of the record.

"Well," said Mr. Malcolm quietly, "that's torn it."

Vivien Waugh looked at him and smiled, a superior, unpleasant sort of smile.

"So you expected to find it?" he said.

"Of course I did," said Mr. Malcolm.

"You must be very optimistic by nature." Vivien Waugh still smiled. "Surely the person who has taken the record would not be such a fool as to allow you to look, without any protest whatsoever, if he had thought that you might find it. As far as I remember there was no protest to your search."

"That's true," said Mr. Malcolm, as if impressed. "That's very true."

"Well," said the Colonel, his voice more gruff than ever—"well, what are we going to do now?"

"Make our beds, I should think," said Mr. Malcolm.

Everyone looked at him, startled.

"And what," said Miss Kate Browne unexpectedly, "do you mean by that?"

"We have arrived at a situation," said Mr. Malcolm, "brought about entirely by the thoughtless person who removed the record so unnecessarily." Mr. Malcolm could not resist the jibe. "It can only be solved in one way. That is, either by the discovery of the record or by its purposeful return. But until that happy event comes about I don't see how we can leave this house."

Mr. Malcolm spoke the last few words very deliberately.

"And who are you, sir," suddenly blustered the Colonel, "who are you, to dictate to me as to my movements?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Malcolm. "I really don't know. On the other hand, it is obvious, isn't it?"

"Not in the least," said Vivien Waugh. "What are you getting at now?"

His tone also was irritated, irritated out of his usual affected drawl: his voice was almost sharp. The Colonel looked at him, and it was clear to see by his expression that he was rather pleased that Vivien Waugh was now suffering from the installation of Mr. Malcolm in their midst, an installation with which he had had so much to do. Obviously the Colonel was longing to remind Vivien Waugh as to who had been the deciding factor in this matter.

"Oh," said Mr. Malcolm, "I'm sorry. I thought it would have been obvious, but since it isn't, let me explain. Has anyone a cigarette?"

Paul Norman drew a case from his pocket and offered it to Mr. Malcolm. Mr. Malcolm took one.

"Thank you so much." He lit it. "I didn't really want this cigarette," he said, puffing mildly, "but I had to collect my thoughts. If I had just sat there thinking, however, perhaps someone would have spoken and put me off. As I see it, the situation now is definitely serious. Someone, obviously, has something to conceal, and something which must have to do with Mr. Browne's death. Had that record never gone—I am sorry to persist on this point, but it is so terribly important—nothing that might have been said in it would have mattered one jot, because we have the doctor's evidence and the verdict of the jury, and it could very easily have been assumed, I think, that Mr. Browne was mad when he made the record. But somebody was not prepared to risk our coming to this conclusion, and that somebody must have done something very serious. Of course, it has nothing to do with me, and if you like I will walk out of the house now, but I cannot promise to keep silence about what has occurred. As an ordinary member of the public it would be my duty to go straight to the inspector of police and tell him exactly what has happened, and I don't see how he could possibly fail to take action. If, on the other hand, you wish to keep this entirely a family affair—well, then obviously my hands are tied and my mouth is sealed. But I must insist on one thing—that you should pursue the matter to its logical conclusion, and if you find some person guilty of something which cannot remain a family matter, then you must hand that person over to the police. Have I made myself quite clear?

"I am not quite certain in my mind," continued Mr. Malcolm suddenly, after a pause in which he had allowed his words to sink in, and plenty of time for there to be no possible doubt as to his meaning, "since the events that have happened in this room this morning, that the late Mr. Browne was mad when he made that record. He may have been going mad through the persecution of somebody, and in that case it is quite possible that the person who took the record is one and the same as he who is responsible for the persecution, and directly responsible either for the murder of Mr. Browne or, indirectly, for killing him through sending him mad and making him take his own life. But one thing is perfectly clear to me. This is a matter which must be settled before we leave this house."

"Well, what do you propose?" said Vivien Waugh.

"That we should all have a rest," said Mr. Malcolm with conviction. "That we should have time to think the matter over—one of us wants it very badly."

He looked at his watch.

"It is now nearly one. I suggest that as many as possible should lunch here, without leaving the house."

"They were going to, in any case," said Alaris. "I had lunch ordered for all of them. There will be quite enough for you, Mr. Malcolm."

"Do we want him?" asked Kate Browne.

"I'm afraid," said Mr. Yarrow, "even though you don't want him, you'll have to have him now. He's too far in this."

Miss Browne muttered something defiantly, but raised no further protest.

"I should be delighted to lunch here," said Mr. Malcolm, "but I don't think we should talk about this subject any more than we can help. If, by this evening, no one has owned up, or the record has not been found, then I think . . . er . . . that we shall have to make our beds."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous!"

It was the Colonel who spoke.

"I'm not being ridiculous," said Mr. Malcolm. "Either I walk out of this house at any moment that you like, and place the entire story in the hands of the police, or then I stay and we come to a definite conclusion ourselves."

He rose to his feet.

"Perhaps you would like to discuss this matter when I am not present. I will take a walk around the house."

"Just one minute, Mr. Malcolm," said Vivien Waugh. "I, for one, don't propose to be dictated to by you quite so much as all this. I propose to leave this house if no decision has been come to—tonight!"

For a moment Mr. Malcolm paused. He seemed to be working something out in his brain, perhaps seeking for the right words, but when he spoke it was with a determination which commanded attention. "If anyone leaves this house tonight without my permission and before the discovery of the record or an explanation by the person who took it, then I shall have to go to the police. And I might add," he said quietly, but very purposefully, "I might perhaps add—to make things very clear—that surely if any of you go away with the matter still standing as it does, it will be rather a confession of guilt."

Mr. Malcolm turned abruptly and walked from the room.

CHAPTER VII

For a moment or two there was a dead silence. The suddenness of Mr. Malcolm's exit had taken them all by surprise. No one moved, but in all of their minds—with the sole exception of the girl—revolved the same vital question. They were wondering, wondering with a gravity which they now fully realized the matter most obviously called for, exactly which course would be the safer: to allow a stranger—a man who might almost be termed an intruder—to dictate to them their movements, or to flout his demands, leaving him free to place the suspicious happenings of that morning before the majesty of the law. There was a nasty sound about this last which appalled even the cool indifference of Vivien Waugh. A trial for murder seemed, on the face of it, not such a glaring impossibility, and into the sunlit room a shadow, grim and impalpable, fell disturbingly upon them.

It was Vivien Waugh who at last broke the silence. He moved slowly over to the window and stood staring out into the straggling garden, his eyes bright with anger.

"Well, this is a nice termination to a ghastly morning, I must say," he drawled. "How my dear uncle would have gloated over us if only he'd been present."

"Perhaps it was his spirit that removed the record," suggested Paul Norman moodily.

But the Colonel became impatient.

"All this has got nothing whatever to do with the thing we are here to decide," he said querulously. "The point is—are we to allow this pompous interloper to order all our comings and goings, or shall we depart and leave the matter as it stands?"

"All the facts thereupon being placed before the police," put in Kate Browne with bitter meaning.

"Exactly!"

The Colonel's face became even more suffused with purple. He turned furiously on Alaris, his voice thickened with increasing passion.

"And it's all your doing, miss," he added chokingly. "All your blasted doing. If this man hadn't been asked to stay, no one outside the family need have known—and we could all have gone our ways in peace."

"Not so fast," broke in George Yarrow curtly.

The self-complacency had vanished entirely from the little solicitor's face and manner, and he spoke now with an unaffected sincerity and an obvious honesty which commanded instant attention. Everyone turned to him curiously.

"Not so fast," he repeated. "I'm not at all sure that even had Mr. Malcolm not been pressed to remain, I, myself, would not have considered it my bounden duty to place the events of this morning before the police. There's a strangeness in all this which, to my mind, is hardly innocent."

"Then . . . then," the Colonel spluttered incoherently, "I am to understand that you, Mr. Yarrow, desire this man . . . this impostor . . . to dictate to us . . . you consent to his suggestion?"

"I do." George Yarrow spoke sharply. "Most emphatically I do, Colonel Browne. Anything is preferable, I think we must all agree, to inviting the police to extend to us their interest. I consider the unbiassed intervention of an outsider—a trustworthy outsider such as Mr. Malcolm appears to be—the one solution to this ghastly business."

"And so do I."

Angela Browne spoke clearly, decisively, and all eyes were turned in her direction. She was breathing a little more quickly than usual, and from her face all trace of colour had vanished.

"So that's two in Napoleon's favour," drawled Vivien Waugh quietly. "And the rest—what do they think? Mr. Malcolm or the police—which?"

"Mr. Malcolm!"

The name came simultaneously from the lips of three people present: Alaris, Kate Browne, and Paul Norman had declared their vote.

"So." Waugh nodded his head calmly. "And I'm inclined to think that you're right. Discretion being the better part of any rancour! Well—that makes six . . . and you, Colonel?"

All eyes revolved towards the mottled countenance of the rotund little officer. He glared back at them for a moment, almost like a stag at bay; then, turning on his heel, he walked with quick steps towards the window, and stared out for a moment or two as though in search of inspiration. At last, swinging round abruptly, he murmured:

"Oh, very well... just as you like! But I think it's nothing but a damned imposition!"

He glared round at them all once more, and with a muttered oath marched from the room.

"Vanquished!" said Vivien Waugh lightly.

For a few moments there was an awkward pause, awkward for all of them; then, with an exaggerated deference, Waugh turned to Alaris, who throughout the scene had remained seated erect in her chair, her eyes flitting from face to face with an anxious eagerness. He spoke briskly:

"At the risk of appearing a trifle precipitate, Miss Browne, I venture to suggest that we should now adjourn for lunch."

With a quick resumption of her duties as hostess, Alaris leapt to her feet and led the way from the room.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. MALCOLM left the house and walked over the tennis court towards the belt of trees which separated it from the fourth tee. At one point in this belt of trees he looked around at the undergrowth carefully, and noticed, with disapproval, that certain of the plants and ferns had been trampled upon, so that it was obvious that some time previously a passage had been forced, and that someone even had cleared a space. Mr. Malcolm smiled to himself and tidily rearranged those plants whose stems were not broken beyond repair, so that they assumed, more or less, their natural condition once again. He then removed as far as possible any traces which might lead a chance stranger to suppose himself not the first to pass along that way. After which, Mr. Malcolm returned across the tennis court and walked around the house.

He regretted that he had left his cigarettes in the clubhouse before starting on that recent round of golf, for he would very much have liked the comforting influence of tobacco at that moment. But Mr. Malcolm was not one to crave the impossible, and he quickly dismissed from his mind the thought of how much he would like a cigarette, since it was obviously impossible for him to obtain one. He continued his perambulations until he had completely rounded the house, then, looking at his watch, he realized that he had been absent for nearly a quarter of an hour.

"Sufficient?" asked Mr. Malcolm of himself.

It was a question, and he pondered over it.

"Another five minutes," he said quietly.

He went out into the middle of the tennis court and idly examined the net, which was loosely hanging there ready to be tightened for play at any moment. He found a hole in it. Mr. Malcolm did not like finding holes in anything. From his pocket he produced a short piece of string and mended the hole in the net; then, turning, he walked quickly to the house and entered it.

As he walked into the hall he met Alaris leading her guests towards the dining room.

"Ah!" he said, "food, my dear? How excellent! I'm feeling quite hungry."

Alaris smiled to him.

"I was just coming to call you," she said.

"No need to call me for food," said Mr. Malcolm. "I'm nearly always the first into the dining room."

"Unless there are ladies present, I hope?" suggested Alaris mischievously.

"Oh," said Mr. Malcolm, "thank you first for the compliment, and secondly for the fact that obviously you are much more yourself."

He looked at her. Certainly the girl appeared much better than she had been throughout the morning. There was a little more colour to her cheeks and a brighter expression in her eyes. But Mr. Malcolm noted, with regret, that still she was by no means normal, although he could not but remark that this air of fragility and worry did not detract from her looks at all too drastically.

In spite of Alaris's brave attempt to resume some show of her duties as hostess, that lunch was in no way a success. There was, not unnaturally, a very strained atmosphere in the room. Even the Colonel, garrulous though he normally was, did not seem to be able to find anything to say. His wife and her sister-in-law pecked only at the food before them, and Vivien Waugh was the only one, bar Mr. Malcolm himself, who did full justice to the lunch. But even Waugh was silent, and it was a relief to all of them when the meal at last came to an end and they rose from the table.

"Well," said Alaris, turning to Mr. Malcolm, "we've decided. We want you to stay."

"Good!" said Mr. Malcolm. "And just as well."

"Why?" asked Vivien Waugh insolently.

"Because I was staying in any case," said Mr. Malcolm. "It makes things so much more simple if you want me."

"Yes," said the Colonel gruffly, "much more comfortable."

"It is always," said Mr. Malcolm, "a very pleasant thing when something which obviously is going to be done is done with the consent of all those present."

"'Which obviously is going to be done'?"

Again Vivien Waugh spoke, and his voice was mocking.

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Malcolm. "You didn't want me to go to the police, did you? I shouldn't—in your place—either. I hope that we may come to a perfectly reasonable solution to what now appears to be a difficult problem before the evening is over."

For a moment no one answered him, but then Alaris again stepped into the breach.

"Well?"

"Well?" repeated Mr. Malcolm.

"Well," said Alaris, "what do we do now?"

"Back to the sitting room," said Mr. Malcolm. "Just for a few moments only. I've something to say."

So back they all went, and once more returned to the chairs which they had each occupied previously. Mr. Malcolm noted that fact: noted that there was no change: that each person returned to the same place in that room in which he had been seated when first Mr. Malcolm had entered.

"Well," said Mr. Malcolm, beating about no bush, "let's come to the point at once. I shan't keep you long. I can see no reason why we should make ourselves prisoners in this house. Obviously it is too early yet, after his or her refusal of this morning, to expect the person who took that record to confess. On the other hand, should we all go about our various pleasures, perhaps that person who is responsible for us still being here will seize the opportunity of returning the record to the gramophone. If, then, on playing it we discover that we can conscientiously put down what we hear to the ravings of a madman, I think our troubles are over."

"Go about our pleasures?" said Vivien Waugh incredulously.

"But of course," said Mr. Malcolm. "Don't let's be too serious over it. After all, it may be nothing, you know. I hope it is nothing . . . just a storm in a tankard."

"I thought you said it was very serious," remarked the Colonel sharply.

"The circumstances are certainly serious, so serious that I don't find myself justified in creeping out of this family disturbance into which I crashed so unexpectedly. But I have never said that there may not be a perfectly simple explanation. I am hoping that there is."

"And do you seriously expect us, in these circumstances," came the drawling tones of Vivien Waugh, "to go about our pleasures? In any case, what are they?"

"Mine," said Mr. Malcolm, "is a round of golf."

Almost before the words were out of his mouth Paul Norman had jumped to his feet.

"I'm with you," he said.

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Malcolm. "Have you forgotten how bad I am? A golfer of your calibre can't get any joy out of playing with me."

Paul Norman laughed; rather a nervous laugh.

"Why not?" he said. "I'll try to give you a stroke a hole, Mr. Malcolm."

"Have you forgotten what happened," said Mr. Malcolm mildly, "the last time you tried to give me a stroke a hole?"

"That," said the young man, "is a defeat which I propose to avenge this afternoon."

"Good!" said Mr. Malcolm. "I shall be delighted to give you the opportunity."

He rose to his feet.

"Ready?"

"Just one minute," said Vivien Waugh. "Shouldn't there be some sort of zero hour?"

"Zero hour?" inquired Mr. Malcolm.

"Yes—for us to meet again? For us to see if anyone has returned that record?"

"Quite true," said Mr. Malcolm. "What about tea? Norman and I will play our round of golf and return here for tea. Let's all have tea here together, and until that time let's all leave this room severely alone, in the hope that the record will be returned."

"I don't see," said George Yarrow hesitantly, "quite how we can all . . ."

"Oh, don't be silly," exploded the Colonel. "What he means is that everyone except the person who took the record should leave it alone, and then whoever took it will have a clear field."

"Will that help us?" said Mr. Yarrow. "What I mean is that then we don't know who took the record, even if it is returned."

Mr. Malcolm stopped him with a gesture of the hand.

"Now then, Yarrow," he said, "provided there is nothing on that record to interfere with our peace of mind, provided that we can agree that that record is just the raving of a lunatic, I don't think we really need worry who took it. If we are going to start doing that—well, then . . . anything may happen. We don't want anything to happen. After all, we've got a perfectly good verdict from the Coroner's Jury on the subject. If we can't agree, however, then the person who took it must tell us that he did and why he did. But let's hear that record first. Coming, Norman?"

Without another word Mr. Malcolm led the way from the room.

"Where are your clubs?" said Mr. Malcolm, as they left the house.

"At the clubhouse."

"Right! We will walk down."

"But," said Paul Norman thoughtfully, "I thought you were playing this morning?"

"By Jove!" said Mr. Malcolm. "Of course I was. Now, where did I leave my clubs?"

"Not at the tee?" said Norman quietly. "At the fourth tee after you hit that ball?"

"Yes," said Mr. Malcolm, "of course that's what I did. I'll get them."

He moved off quickly, over the tennis court, to that belt of trees through which he had passed already that morning. Mr. Malcolm seemed to be very particular as to the route which he took. Mr. Malcolm walked through the undergrowth over exactly that same course in which he had been at such pains to remove all trace of a previous transit. There could be no question, after Mr. Malcolm's passage, but that it was Mr. Malcolm himself, on his way to collect his clubs, who had trampled down the plants so recklessly.

Paul Norman continued in the normal route to the clubhouse, and was very soon joined by Mr. Malcolm. He fetched his clubs from the locker, and they started at once upon their round.

Paul Norman won the first hole. Mr. Malcolm found trouble from the tee. Paul Norman won the second hole. Mr. Malcolm had a perfect tee shot, but omitted to perfect any other. Paul Norman won the third hole. Mr. Malcolm was improving. He hit two good shots. His third entered into a bunker guarding the green, and after a considerable interval of time he was forced to leave it, carrying his ball. They approached the fourth tee, and Norman bent down to tee up his ball. As he did so he looked across at the house, which could be seen only fifty yards distant, through the belt of trees.

"Good gracious, Mr. Malcolm!" he said lightly.

"That must have been a most extraordinary shot of yours this morning."

"It was," said Mr. Malcolm. "It was. I must have hit it right off the toe of the club."

"I should think," said Norman quietly, "that you must have hit it off the face altogether, almost on the rounded surface of the club. Let's have a look at your driver."

Rather shamefacedly, somewhat abashed at his lack of skill, Mr. Malcolm produced his driver. Norman took it.

"Funny," he said, "there's no mark on it whatever. Usually if I hit a ball there it leaves a white mark on the varnish of the club."

"But you never hit a ball there," said Mr. Malcolm.

"Perhaps not now," replied Norman lightly, "but I have done. It took me some time to become scratch, you know."

Rather thoughtfully, and without another word, Norman returned the driver to its owner. He then took up his stance, and hit a long drive right down the middle of the fairway, standing aside at once for his opponent to play. But he never watched Mr. Malcolm at the shot. Instead his eyes kept roving towards that clump of trees, seeking some clue as to how a ball could steer its way through the trees and strike that window almost at right angles to the line of play.

Mr. Malcolm hit his shot, not a bad one for him, although it was many yards behind that of his opponent. He took up his clubs, replaced the driver in the bag, and slung it over his shoulder.

But Paul Norman made no movement from the tee.

"What's the matter?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"I think it's so extraordinary," said Paul Norman slowly, "about that shot that you played this morning. Look—it had to go through all those trees and not hit one!"

"The most extraordinary things do happen," said Mr. Malcolm. "I remember once when I was playing in Scotland, I hit a swallow. Think of that! The speed at which the swallow flies and the speed at which a golf ball goes! One of the best shots I've ever hit in my life, but completely ruined."

"Did it kill the bird?" inquired Norman.

Mr. Malcolm looked at him. There was something underlying the question: that was obvious. But when he answered, Mr. Malcolm spoke entirely naturally.

"Yes," he said; "I was terribly sorry. Of course, it was a pure accident, but still . . ."

"It wasn't murder, for instance?" said Paul Norman.

"Oh, no," said Mr. Malcolm lightly. "Merely bird slaughter!"

"I see," said Norman.

Slowly, rather hesitantly, as though loath to leave the subject, he took up his clubs, and the pair continued on their round.

For ten minutes or so they continued to play: Paul

Norman with his usual brilliance: Mr. Malcolm with an enthusiastic care which should have merited far better results. Occasionally one or other of them would make some curt remark, trifling and casual, entirely relevant to the game on which they were engaged, but into Paul Norman's manner had crept a certain change, a change hardly perceptible in his speech, but clearly to be discerned in the frequent glances, keen and a little hostile, which he stole from time to time at his companion's face. Of all of this, however, Mr. Malcolm appeared quite oblivious. All his attention, all his thoughts, seemed bound up entirely in the game. True, he frowned repeatedly, but this was probably only in displeasure at the poorness of his skill.

They had been playing now for over half an hour, and, unseen by either of them, so intent had they become, either upon their thoughts or on the shots which they were making, a definite change had fallen upon the day. Clouds, black and menacing, were coursing their way across the heavens like giant battle cruisers en route for war. And, like a sudden cannonade announcing combat, rain, steady and unceasing, drenched down upon them. Both players stopped in surprise and stared around at the deserted links and the black denseness of the clouds above them. The rain had descended instantly, without the slightest preliminary drizzle, and in a very little while both men had become quite saturated, their clothes clinging to them limply with a moist discomfort.

"We'd better run for it," said Paul Norman quickly.

He picked up his clubs and, turning, glanced swiftly at the streaming face of his companion.

"Yes . . . but where? The clubhouse or . . . ?"

"The Martello tower," interrupted Norman curtly. "It's nearer . . . if only it's open. Come on!"

And without another word he led the way across the soaking golf links in the direction of the sea, where already the waves were assuming monstrous shapes, as though they were rivalling the strange contours of the clouds.

To the right of the golf links, grim remnant of a forgotten past, the stark outline of a Martello tower broke the blank horizon. Stranded in that lonely spot, its original purpose long since obsolete, the tower had descended abruptly in the social scale, degenerated from the safeguarding of a coast to the casual guardianship of some worthless tools. For here it was that Major Peter Browne, whose tragic death less than a week before was causing so much consternation in the minds of his relations, had stored certain articles peculiar to fishing: his collapsible boat, his tackle, and a goodly display of rods. An obstinate persistency, which had been his main characteristic throughout an aggressive life, together with the expenditure of a quite considerable sum of money, had procured to this man the ownership of the quaint mass of stones from which the most important feature had long since vanished—for the moss-grown bareness of its roof boasted no gun, not even a tarnished one to prove its initial right to existence.

It was up to this tower that the two men ran, breathless and soaking, and in each mind one question was predominant. Would the door have been left open, as it sometimes was, when Peter Browne had removed his tackle from it? Stumbling their way over the pebbles separating it from the even greenness of the golf course, at last they reached the door, and to their joy discovered that, on being pushed, it swung wide open, admitting entrance. In a second the two men were within, shaking the water from their clothes and rejoicing gaspingly upon securing shelter.

"It was a good idea of yours, Norman," spluttered Mr. Malcolm spasmodically. "As brilliant as your golf. I shouldn't have thought of this in a million years."

He leant against an upturned cask, which was the only thing which the room appeared to offer, and stared around him curiously. The place was damp, unpleasantly damp, and Mr. Malcolm could not resist a shudder.

"What a quaint sort of place!" he said at last, when he had a little recovered his breath. "I've never been in one before."

"I came here once with Alaris," said Paul Norman quietly. "It's rather interesting, isn't it? You ought to go up to the roof when the rain stops."

Mr. Malcolm rose up from his half-leaning, half-sitting position upon the cask, and moved over to a ladder which led to the floor above. He stared out of the narrow slit which served as window and marvelled at the excessive thickness of the walls. But his glance out of that slit had also showed him that the first force of the shower had expended itself. Rain was falling now in a drizzle—a steady drizzle, it was true, but with none of the violence of its preliminary outburst.

"I think I'll go up and have a look at that roof," said Mr. Malcolm, turning round towards Paul Norman, who was engaged, somewhat unsuccessfully, upon attempting to dry with an excessively rain-bespattered handkerchief the driver he had been using. "Coming?"

Norman shook his head.

"No, thanks. I've had enough wetting for today—and besides, I've been up once."

"All right."

Without another word, Mr. Malcolm walked quickly up the steps. A few seconds later he stood upon the first floor of the tower, and proceeded to mount a spiral stone stairway which led directly to the parapet above.

For a second or two Paul Norman remained where he was, but in his face a strained listening look had taken the place of his former casual attention to the work upon which he was engaged. Suddenly rising to his feet, he walked lightly to the bottom of the ladder and stood there listening intently. A strange, set expression had come into his eyes, a curiously determined curve to his lips. A moment more he waited, then, falling gently upon his knees, he lifted a trapdoor set in the floor at the very bottom of the ladder, a trapdoor so encrusted with dust and dirt as to be unnoticeable to anyone unaware of its existence. With eager fingers he slipped back the bolt, and then, taking every care to avoid making a noise, he pulled the trapdoor open and stared down into the black mustiness of a cellar below. For a second more he hesitated, as though unable to continue that thing which his thoughts had led him to enact, but for a second only. Then the set expression on his face deepened perceptibly, and, bending down until he lay almost along the floor, he busied himself carefully with a ladder which lay lightly against the opening and led down to the blackness beyond.

Quickly and noiselessly Norman lifted the ladder and pulled it up through the opening. Then, rising lightly to his feet, he carried it to the opposite side of the room. Returning to the trapdoor, he stood beside it listening intently, staring up into the darkness of the ascending ladder. The afternoon had become dark and overclouded, and within the tower the light was almost that of evening. In this sombre twilight the face of Paul Norman had assumed an ugly, desperate look: he was entirely unlike that light-hearted young man who had walked so jauntily up the path leading to that great house only a few hours before. His thoughts as he stood there, almost crouching beside the wall, could have been none too pleasant, for his lips were drawn into a straight narrow line, a line which suggested, more than anything else, that he was in the grip of an unusual, overwhelming emotion, an emotion which it needed all his will power to control.

Suddenly he became rigid. A sound had come to his ears: the gentle tap-tap of approaching footsteps. He crouched back against the rounded wall, his heart beating wildly. Nearer and nearer came the footsteps, and down the worm-eaten rungs of the ladder Mr. Malcolm came into view. He had come from the light into the darkness, and the contrast had entirely blinded him—a fact for which Paul Norman had been quite prepared. It was, therefore, with no previous glimpse as to his foothold that Mr. Malcolm descended the steps, reached the last one, stepped out into what should have been the flooring of the tower, and, with a muffled cry, fell . . . down, down . . . into the inky blackness of the cellar beyond.

Without a moment's hesitation Paul Norman slipped the trapdoor into place, fastened the bolt with trembling fingers, and, without another glance around, walked quickly from the tower. A second later he was running swiftly in the direction of the great house of which he could catch a glimpse through that belt of trees which lay between.

CHAPTER IX

THE rain had stopped, but on the golf links water still lay in muddy puddles, and as he ran Paul Norman felt his feet sink deeply into the ground, making his progress at least twice as difficult. The resultant loss of time irked him considerably, and, spurring his limbs to a greater speed, he ran wildly across the links, until the belt of trees lay just before him.

There he stopped, stopped on the instant with the sudden coming of a thought. He glanced quickly at his watch, and an anxious frown made its appearance on his forehead. It was now close on four o'clock, and tea time—so Mr. Malcolm had arranged—was to be the zero hour, the critical moment when they all again should meet to see if someone had returned that record. How could he face them all alone? How explain the absence of this man whom he now feared so much?

For a moment this disturbing thought deprived him of the power to move. He dared not risk arriving at the house without some explanation that might seem quite normal: yet the scene through which he had just passed, the memory of that muffled cry which had sounded so grimly in his ears as Mr. Malcolm had plunged headlong into the cellar beneath him, remained in his mind, confusing his thoughts and forbidding to him temporarily the power of cool reasoning. What should he say? He stared helplessly around at the deserted links, blankly at the house before him, which he could just glimpse through the trees, stared while the seconds rushed irrevocably past, until, with a sudden panic tightening his nerves, he realized that already time, precious time, had slipped wantonly from his grasp, like the senseless squandering of a spendthrift man. What should he say?

And then, with sudden clarity, came the idea, and the way was clear. Mr. Malcolm had gone to the club-house to return his clubs. Nothing could be more simple, nothing more prone to occur. But, even as the solution to his problem flashed through his mind, even as the frown lightened on his brow, another thought drove it back again with renewed intensity, shocked his brain into a lightning clearness.

For within the Martello tower, plain to be seen by any who should chance to pass, he had left the clubs—both his own and those of Mr. Malcolm—a damning evidence of the latter's whereabouts. Mr. Malcolm was renowned for his keenness as a golfer, and no golfer who is keen and tidy would ever leave his clubs within the open doorway of a room where all might enter. For a moment the thought and all that it involved numbed his mind entirely: but for the moment only. He had no time now to return for his clubs . . . that must come later. For the present his business was with Alaris: his happiness and hers rested, perhaps, solely upon his arriving at that house before the zero hour. *The zero hour*—the words rang like a tocsin in his brain, striking a warning note that presaged evil. And with a sudden jerking of his shoulders, a determined set of his chin, Paul Norman started to run once more, until he had entered within the belt of trees and was only a few paces from the lawn before the house.

Here he stopped and, hidden from view in the branches, he peered cautiously about, taking every care to avoid detection. The sun, a rather watery sun, had crept hesitantly out from behind a silver-edged cloud, and was doing its best to brighten the bedraggled garden. In its fitful light two people were walking, arm-in-arm, engaged in what was, apparently, a most important conversation. Paul Norman stared at them in surprise, a surprise which was tinged with a slight misgiving. He had known Colonel Michael Browne and his wife only a short time, but long enough to make him fully realize that this affectionate perambulation was by no means a usual event with these two people. The Colonel, he could see, was speaking with a gentleness of manner entirely foreign to his ordinary explosive bluntness. He was patting his wife's arm lightly as though he were eager to show her his sympathy: and into the face of Angela Browne a curious change had come, a change which, even at the distance he was from them, Norman could see and marvel at. The haughtiness had gone, and in its place was a somewhat humble gratitude.

For a second Paul Norman stood stockstill in amazement at the sight before him, and then, realizing that his own problem was, by this very thing, made yet more acute, he slipped back into the further cover of the trees to ponder on his next move. Approach across the tennis lawn was barred, and in a little while, his mind made up, he slipped quickly along the belt of trees until he was in line with the house itself. A privet hedge of stately growth skirted the tennis lawn, reaching almost to the ground-floor windows. Under cover of this Norman made his way swiftly to the side of the house, to a French window which led into a tiny room used as a study. No one was within, and with eager fingers he pushed one door open and slipped noiselessly inside. He stood there a moment listening intently, but he could hear no sound. Then, tiptoeing softly to the door of the room, he looked around it cautiously. Still no one was in sight.

He hesitated for a moment only. The stairs were opposite, and they led, among others, to the room of Alaris. What more likely than that the girl, worn with the exciting and grim happenings of the morning, had retired therein to ponder them in peace? With light steps Norman tiptoed gently up the stairs and along a passage to a door on the right. He stood before it for a few seconds as though in hesitation, and then with one hand he knocked lightly on the panels.

There was an interval of silence, and then, clear but a trifle worried, came Alaris's voice.

"Come in," she said.

Norman was quick to respond to her invitation. He opened the door quietly, slipped in, and shut it again just as noiselessly, then, turning, he looked at the girl.

Alaris presented an attractive picture. She was sitting at her dressing table half turned towards him, having looked round to see who was entering. Obviously she was tidying herself, perhaps after snatching an hour or two of sleep during the afternoon. But to a man who knew her as well as did Paul Norman it was evident that she had not been resting, for there were rings beneath her eyes, rings which she was now in process of removing with the aid of powder. It was clear that Alaris had been crying, and Paul Norman felt his heart jump to his throat in sympathy for her distress. But even as he looked at her Norman realized that there must be something about his own appearance which surprised, even startled, the girl. A look of perplexity came over her face, and this was closely followed by a hint of fear leaping to her eyes.

"Paul," she said, and then again, "Paul."

"What's the matter?" said Norman.

He was surprised at the sound of his own voice: it was so utterly unlike the tone which he was accustomed to hear when he spoke. The words came hoarsely, gruffly, not at all in that manner which it was natural for him to use to the girl whom he loved.

"Paul," she said, "you are . . . you are . . ."

She rose to her feet and faced him. A look of determination had replaced the fear in her eyes.

"What has happened?" she asked.

The young man could not reply. He cursed himself for this inability, but for a few seconds more he could find no words to say. Then suddenly, torrentially as that downpour which had drenched him, the words came to him.

"Alaris," he cried, "Alaris darling, get some things together quickly and come away. Right out of this. It's killing me!"

For a moment the girl hesitated, but when she spoke there was no hint of hesitancy in her voice.

"Paul," she said, "where is Mr. Malcolm?"

"He's . . . he's downstairs."

Even in that grim moment Paul Norman felt an hysterical desire to laugh, for his lie was so literally the truth, although his words were not meant to allude to that house.

"Downstairs?" said Alaris.

"Yes. He's . . . the rain came on, and we came back."

"That's not true," said Alaris quietly.

A man cannot lie to the girl whom he loves, no matter how accomplished he may be as a liar generally, and Paul Norman realized the truth of this fact with a sudden, stunning certainty. He looked at Alaris, and saw in her eyes that she believed no word of what he had just said, yet from her attitude he sensed that in no way did she dislike him for his untruthfulness: that, indeed, she forgave him, because she understood, perhaps, that it was not merely for his own sake that he was lying, but very largely for her sake as well. And in that moment Paul Norman realized that only one thing could help him at this stage: he must tell Alaris as much as he dared of the truth. This affair must be settled between them once and for all.

"Yes," he said, "Mr. Malcolm is not here."

"Where is he?" asked Alaris.

Her voice was toneless. She seemed inured now to any further shocks which might befall her. So much had already happened that day, so much which was unexpected and grim, that she felt that nothing else which might occur would greatly matter. A calm had come over her, that calm which succeeds the first moment of excitement, even though the danger is still present.

"Never mind where he is," said Norman shortly. "He isn't here. Listen, Alaris. I know . . . I know something has happened . . . something is worrying you to death. Let's get out of it while we can. I can't stand seeing you like this. You look dreadful, Alaris. You look as if . . . as if . . ."

He paused. The words which were in his brain would not formulate.

Alaris laughed shortly. But to Paul Norman that laugh was as strange in his ears as had been his own voice only a few minutes earlier. It was mirthless and hard, and these two features were as foreign to the Alaris whom he had known as her actions during that day—in fact, ever since the death of her guardian—had been foreign to her normal behaviour.

"What you are trying to tell me," said Alaris suddenly, "what you are trying to tell me is that I look as if I had killed him . . . as if I were guilty of the murder."

Paul Norman thought quickly.

"We don't know that there has been a murder," he said. "Mr. Malcolm himself is doubtful, but . . ."

"I didn't," said Alaris.

She said it very low, her lips closing sharply upon the words, which were scarcely audible.

"I didn't," she began again, and this time more loudly. "I didn't . . . *I didn't!* . . ."

Her voice had risen almost to a scream. She was very near to hysteria, but Norman acted immediately. He was by her side before she knew he had moved. She was in his arms, had her face buried in his shoulder and the tears streaming down her cheeks before she realized it.

"Quiet, Alaris! Quiet!"

Now, for the first time, Norman recognized his own voice.

"Quiet, Alaris! Steady, darling! I don't want anybody to know I'm here. What does it matter, anyway, so long as we love each other? If you come now I can promise you a good start. We can get right away somewhere, just you and I, where we can live together. I've got enough for you not to have to worry. Darling, do come . . . do please come."

Very gently but firmly Alaris disentangled herself from his arms and stood back a pace.

"Paul," she said, "I've told you the truth. I know you don't believe me, but I have. I didn't kill my guardian. I hated him at times . . . nearly always, in fact . . . but I never thought of killing him. I don't say I didn't long for him to die, but . . . Oh, can't you believe me?"

Irritation at his obvious incredulity thickened her voice, and she stopped speaking and stared at him helplessly, as though unable to continue her attempt to pierce through the blank wall of his disbelief. Intense emotion had endowed her face with a beauty which, even in that moment of acute anxiety, Norman could not fail to admire. The colour in her cheeks had flushed to crimson, while in her eyes there was a brightness which they had long been lacking, a brightness which the few remaining teardrops only enhanced.

But in Norman's head there was a fixed idea, and ready though he was to believe the girl he loved, yet subconsciously the fear of her guilt refused to be dismissed.

"Of course I believe you," he said, "but let's go, all the same. It's so much simpler. I *will* look after you, darling. I swear I will. I'll make you happy . . . so happy that you'll forget everything."

Suddenly the mood of anger left her completely with the gentleness of his words. She held out her hands and took his in her own, and there they stood for a moment or two, staring at each other, telling each other by their expressions far more than they could ever have put into words. The feeling of doubt had passed: each trusted the other implicitly, each was trying to help, and to Alaris had come full knowledge that whatever the mystery which so obviously had lain upon her lover's mind when first he had entered that room, anything that might have happened had been done by him, perhaps erroneously, but purely and simply for her sole benefit. She smiled at him, a tender smile, a smile which whenever he saw it thrilled him anew, but now even more so because he realized, perhaps, a little of what had been running through her mind, and knew that even though he had made mistakes they would be forgiven and forgotten.

"Tell me," he said quietly.

For a moment longer she remained looking at him, fixing his eyes intently with her own: for a moment longer, and then she spoke, and her voice was even, just as even as had been his.

"Paul," she said, "I may have been responsible for his death . . . I don't know. But I didn't kill him purposefully. I swear I didn't."

"Of course not," said Paul quietly.

For the first time there was real conviction in his voice, a conviction which helped Alaris enormously, for she knew that at last she was being believed.

"I'll tell you all about that later, but that's what's been worrying me."

Norman smiled to her, and when he spoke his voice was very gentle.

"Alaris," he said, "I believe you—but others may not."

"I know," said Alaris.

"And I don't think Mr. Malcolm would."

"I've never told him," said Alaris.

"No," said Norman quickly. "But . . . that Mr. Malcolm seems to know the hell of a lot. Who is he, and why did he burst in upon us?"

"He didn't burst in upon us," said Alaris. "After all, he couldn't help being a bad golfer. It's just unfortunate."

"No," said Norman. Gently he seized her hand. "No, my darling. He did burst in upon us. I know that now for certain."

At his words, spoken very seriously, Paul Norman noticed that again a hint of fear had crept into the eyes of the girl.

"How do you know?" she asked, and there was a little tremor in her voice.

"The shot which he is supposed to have made," said Norman, very gravely, "is quite impossible. Even though I'll allow a miracle may happen, all the same a golf ball cannot be hit so hard right off the face of the club without leaving any mark upon the varnish. There was no mark at all on Mr. Malcolm's driver, and he had had no time to remove it had there been one. Even had he tried, it is almost impossible to do it without applying a new coat of varnish . . . and the club was not newly varnished. No, Alaris, Mr. Malcolm went into that belt of trees, teed up a ball, and hit it deliberately through the window. He counted on disturbing us: he intended to burst in upon us, and on looking back I see that, although he took risks, he meant to stay. Why did he do that?"

As he was speaking Norman watched the girl very carefully, watched the changing expression in her eyes and the deepening look of fear in them.

"I don't know," she said hopelessly. "I don't know."

"Neither do I," said Norman, "and I wish to God I did. But he did it deliberately—of that I am certain."

For a moment he paused, and then looked at Alaris.

"You know Mr. Malcolm much better than I do," he said. "Very few of us around here know him well, except as a very keen but bad golfer. He's a nice man—we all like him. But he's mysterious. He disappears for weeks at a time, and no one ever knows what he is doing. What does he do, Alaris?"

"Oh, Paul!"

The two words, naturally quite normal, words which ordinarily might have thrilled Paul Norman's breast to a quick response, this time instilled in him a sudden icy fear: a fear of the unknown, a fear of something which he could not quite define. For a moment his thoughts flew to a panic he had once seen in a theatre which had caught fire, and he remembered vividly the amazing rapidity with which terror had spread throughout that audience. Norman steeled himself. He knew that exactly the same process of thought was happening within his mind at that moment. Alaris was afraid, mortally afraid of something which he could not appreciate, and very quick was he to catch that fear. He steeled himself. He looked at her. He forced himself to speak normally.

"Tell me, Alaris, tell me, darling!"

"I don't know," said the girl, "I don't know—for certain."

"But you suspect?"

"Well, hardly that . . . but have you noticed *when* he goes away?"

"No," said Norman, "that's what's worried me. He doesn't seem to have any particular set times."

"I wonder," said Alaris.

She paused: a frown was on her forehead, a frown of perplexity.

"Well?" said Norman gently.

"He always seems to go away when there's a big case on."

Imperceptibly Norman stiffened. So his own thoughts were proving correct; his own suspicions were shared by someone else.

"What sort of a case?" he asked.

For a moment the girl hesitated, apparently unable to utter the words which she must. Then, almost with a rush, she said them.

"When . . . there's a murder been committed anywhere."

"Yes," said Norman thoughtfully. "Yes—I thought so."

He did not speak again for a moment or two: his thoughts were fully occupied in recalling all that had occurred up to then, leading him to suspect this very thing. But at last he almost shook himself free from his absorption.

"Well," he said, "Mr. Malcolm won't trouble us for the moment. Come on, Alaris. Let's get out. This can't have any ending."

"But I think he's on my side," said Alaris. "Don't you see that?"

"Yes, darling." Norman spoke gently. "But he can't . . ."

He stopped. Again that look of fear leapt into the girl's eyes, again she stared at him almost uncomprehendingly, as though unable to realize the full portent of these words which had slipped so spontaneously from between his lips.

"So you haven't believed me?" she said.

Her voice sounded dull and listless: all the hope, all the interest which she had displayed in the recent conversation had gone. The words had been a shock to her, and Norman realized that whatever he might say now, nothing could make up for that unfinished sentence which he had just uttered. But he took his courage in both hands and spoke bravely.

"Listen, Alaris. You've told me that you may be responsible for his death. If you were . . . well, Mr. Malcolm will know it. We've got to get away. Malcolm can do nothing else, if he's on the side of the police, than pursue the thing to its bitter end. Supposing you did it . . . supposing your guardian thought you had done it . . . ?"

"What does it matter what he thought?" said Alaris. "He's dead."

"Yes," said Paul Norman, "but what about that record?"

Alaris did not answer him. She sat down helplessly. Obviously she had completely forgotten about that record in the interest of their discussion about the mysterious Mr. Malcolm. But now the sudden reminder drove all other thoughts from her mind. She seemed to collapse utterly, as though unable any further to maintain the struggle. A hopeless look crept into her face, and when she spoke her voice was tired and a little desperate.

"Oh," she said, "I wish I knew who took that record. It was so silly. As Mr. Malcolm said, no one need have believed a word that my guardian spoke—after the verdict of the Coroner's Jury."

"No one," said Paul Norman, "except Mr. Malcolm himself."

"What do you mean?"

Alaris looked up sharply. She did not follow in the least to what Norman was referring.

"Only this, Alaris," he said. "The thing might have been left quite as it was. Nothing further might have been done—for the moment. But Mr. Malcolm, if he is hand in glove with the police, would have pursued the matter to the bitter end: will do it now if he can, and that record might have helped him . . . might have helped to bring the guilt home."

"So you believe he was murdered?" said Alaris.

Norman hesitated.

"Yes," he said. "I think I do. Everything's so strange."

"I know," said Alaris; "but everything was strange about him, even in life. It's just like him to die like this, with a doubt as to how he died."

"Look here, Alaris." Paul Norman spoke quickly but very earnestly. "Forgive me for what I am going to say, but I've got to say it. It doesn't matter whether you intended or did not intend to kill your guardian. You've told me that you may have been responsible for his death . . . and that, in the eyes of the law, is murder; or, at the very least, manslaughter. Mr. Malcolm, you've just said, is on your side. I think he is, but he's got his duty to perform, if his profession is what we think it is. On the other hand, if you come away with me now, no matter what may happen afterwards, there's no proof, nothing that can be brought against you. If you stay . . . well, Mr. Malcolm may trap you. Look how he's trapped everybody into some form of admission since he came to this house this morning."

"What do you mean?" said Alaris.

Her eyes were opened wide, and she was staring at him almost with a look of horror.

"Oh, Paul. What do you mean?"

Paul Norman hesitated only for a moment, and then he took the plunge.

"Whoever took that record," he said, "is going to take damn good care that it is not found again. Probably by now it's broken into a thousand pieces, and those pieces destroyed. Somebody took it who wasn't going to take any risk. And that's the very idea that I want to get into your head, Alaris. We can't risk anything. We can't risk that man ferreting out all sorts of things from which he might fabricate some story with a slight foundation of truth. I will not have you in danger."

"But in danger of what?" said Alaris.

"Oh, darling!"

Paul Norman's voice now was pleading: his whole attitude implored her to do as he wanted.

"Please! Supposing it's a question only of manslaughter. Supposing that, as you say, you may be . . . you actually are responsible for his death, I can't have you put up for trial . . . I can't have you sent to prison, possibly only for a short time, but with the stigma on you for the rest of your life! Don't you see what I'm getting at? If we go now . . . if nothing further happens . . . if Mr. Malcolm is not given a chance . . ."

He stopped: he could not say the words.

"A chance to prove that I am responsible?" asked Alaris calmly.

"Yes," said Norman eagerly; "then, if Mr. Malcolm is not given that chance, probably he will be only too glad—as we think he is on your side—to give it up altogether, and just to say that the case is finished with the verdict of the Coroner's Jury. Alaris, do come away with me. I swear I'll be good to you."

She rose to her feet: she took a few steps towards him: she took his hands in her own.

"Paul," she said, "I know you would be, but I can't run away like that. It's being a coward, and I'm trying so hard not to be. Don't tempt me, darling. As soon as this is over I'll marry you . . . I swear I will . . . but I've got to face it. I'll go and tell Mr. Malcolm everything. Where is he?"

Paul Norman stared at her, utterly aghast. Not for one moment had he believed that she would really refuse to go. Her reluctance and hesitations he had considered quite natural, but never had he imagined that he would not overcome them.

"Then . . . then you really mean it, Alaris! You won't come?"

He spoke almost incredulously, but in the eyes of Alaris, which met his own squarely and firmly, he knew his answer before the words had time to pass her lips.

"I'm sorry, Paul, dreadfully sorry . . . but I *can't* come. Where's Mr. Malcolm?"

"Mr. Malcolm? Oh, he's . . ."

Paul Norman had started the sentence absently, his mind still engrossed with the thought of her refusal, but then, with a shock, a shock which drove the colour from his cheeks and acted as a dam upon his speech, he realized all that the question involved. He stared at her helplessly, and there was a look upon his face which made Alaris suspect, far more than did his sudden silence, that something had happened, something about which she had heard no word, something in which Mr. Malcolm himself was most vitally concerned.

"What's the matter?" she said quickly, her voice hardly raised above a whisper. "What's the matter, Paul?"

With an effort Paul Norman forced himself to speak, and again the sound of his voice was strange to his ears.

"I . . . it's . . . it's about Mr. Malcolm, dear. I . . . I told you a lie just now. He isn't downstairs. He's . . ."

He stopped, and Alaris urged him on impatiently; but there was no hint of repulsion in her eyes, and when she spoke her voice was gentle.

"Yes . . . go on, Paul. Never mind about the lie . . . I guessed it somehow. But . . . where is Mr. Malcolm?"

"He's . . . oh, darling, please try to understand. You see, I knew that . . . well, that you had something to do with your guardian's death . . . and when we were playing golf together I found out definitely that Mr. Malcolm's shot had been intentional. I had guessed it all along. I'm afraid of that man, Alaris, very afraid . . . for your sake, I mean. Well, it came on to rain, and we took shelter in the Martello tower. Mr. Malcolm went up to look at the roof, and suddenly it occurred to me that if he was out of the way for a bit you and I could make off . . . escape while the coast was clear . . ."

"So you . . . .? For God's sake, Paul, what have you done? You . . . you haven't killed him?"

Alaris, her face white as parchment, spoke the words hollowly, as though she were unable to raise her voice above a whisper. There was horror, stark horror, in her eyes and the expression on her face. But Paul Norman was quick to reassure her.

"Oh, no, no, of course not, darling. How could you think of such a thing! No—merely made him a prisoner for a while until we could get away."

"In the Martello tower?"

"Yes," said Norman slowly, "or, rather, in the cellar. I pulled back that trapdoor—you know, just below the stairs—and he . . . well, he fell down."

Paul Norman made a singularly unsuccessful attempt to laugh light-heartedly.

"*In the cellar?*"

The words came almost as a cry. They were spoken with such acute terror that Paul Norman stared at Alaris in amazement.

"Yes, but . . ."

"How long ago?" interrupted the girl quickly.

There was an urgency in her voice which filled Paul Norman, almost against his will, with a curious sense of foreboding.

"Oh . . . about . . ." He glanced at his watch and made a quick calculation; then: "Yes, about an hour, I should think."

"An hour! My God! . . . Quick! We might just do it. Come on!"

With the words Alaris darted to the door. But Norman seized her by the arm and stopped her flight.

"What's the matter, Alaris . . . what . . . ?"

"The sea," she gasped. "Don't you realize that the sea's been encroaching on this coast for years, and at high tide the tower's under water? That cellar gets full . . . oh, don't you understand?"

Anxiety had made her words almost unintelligible, but Norman had understood almost enough.

"You mean that . . . ?"

"That if we don't hurry Mr. Malcolm will be drowned."

Alaris seized the handle of the door and was already racing along the corridor. Norman hastened after her.

"Sh . . . steady, darling. For heaven's sake, don't let the others hear you. I came in through the study. Let's get out that way."

She nodded, and without another word the two crept noiselessly down the stairs, tiptoed quickly across the hall to that little room just opposite. The sound of voices raised high in dispute made them glance at each other anxiously, but in an instant they realized whence the voices had come. Already, within the sitting room in which so much had happened that day, were gathered the relations of the late Peter Browne—gathered there awaiting eagerly the return of Mr. Malcolm and that fateful meeting which they hoped would resolve all his doubts.

"Good," muttered Norman softly, as they moved silently across the floor of the little study. "That leaves the coast fairly clear."

But Alaris made no answer. Speech had become a difficult thing with her ever since this last development had been thrust upon her. She nodded curtly, and in silence they slipped out of the French window, ran noiselessly along beside the high privet hedge skirting the tennis lawn, until, with a throb of relief, they found themselves within the greater shelter of that belt of trees. Once here they hastened their steps regardless of noise, but neither dared to glance at the other. To both of them this thing had become a nightmare . . . tragedy had been sprung upon them so suddenly that it made them doubt reality. Yet in the minds of both the thought of a man trapped in that water-filled cellar, fighting . . . fighting for his very life, refused to be dismissed.

"Quick!" gasped Alaris suddenly. "That mound over there . . . we can see the tower from it . . . quick!"

She pointed with shaking fingers towards a little hillock just beyond the trees, raised far above the level of the ground. In a second she was running fleetly to it, Paul Norman racing close upon her heels. A moment later they had reached it, scrambled up the sides, and with fluttering hearts were standing on the summit.

With a silent prayer on his lips Norman turned and looked upon the grim mass of stones two hundred yards beyond: with a prayer that all this horror might dissolve itself away, like a nightmare peril in the light of daytime reasoning—dissolve away, bringing back normality once more into their lives. But one glance at the Martello tower wrecked all his hopes. The nightmare had returned, but with an added horror . . . it had become reality itself.

For around that gaunt mass of stones water was swirling—water black and evil in the gathering gloom of night, water which rose two feet or more around its sides, cutting it off completely from the land.

CHAPTER X

MISS KATE BROWNE left the house and walked slowly towards a small sanded prominence in the landscape, from which she knew well that she would obtain a good view of the countryside. She walked in a curiously precise manner, as though each portion of ground covered successively by her feet were carefully selected and approved before being used. Such a nicety of choice was, indeed, entirely typical of Miss Kate Browne's character in all things. She walked through life as through an indifferently supplied store, treating all and everything to a dubious stare of thinly masked contempt before at last deigning to make a gingerly selection. And then it was as though she were resignedly weighing up the disadvantages of the one against the even greater disadvantages of the other, her final choice falling upon that which was the less insupportable . . . a mannerism which did not commend itself to those around her—even to those stalwart souls who bore her scrutiny with a like disapproval, from which a keen sense of irritation was not often absent.

Miss Browne sat herself down on a patch of green grass which, rather surprisingly, was growing in the middle of this sandhill, but first of all she made quite certain that the grass was dry. She then surveyed the countryside in front of her, noting with satisfaction that, as she had hoped, she had obtained a perfect view of almost the entire golf course. She was sitting with her back to the sea, most of which, however, was concealed by the sand dunes which stretched behind her. Only of one corner did she secure a clear view, and that was the corner where the old Martello tower reared its futile shape out of the sands all around. For a moment Miss Browne allowed her eyes and thoughts to rest upon this tower, and she meditated upon the worthlessness of its existence now, its usefulness long since departed. Miss Browne's ruminating mind could not but reflect that the whole of existence was symbolized largely by this obsolete tower. Of use for a few moments—Miss Browne told herself that even the most unimportant have their moments of importance—in the hours of eternity, and then just a ruin left to crumble, a skeleton frame left desolate of the life which had infused it.

That record, for instance. What was a record, after all, said Miss Browne to herself, other than a passing fancy? Some disc which in given circumstances reproduced a tune which had appealed. But the record which had so interfered with their freedom, thanks largely to that pest Mr. Malcolm, had been no thing of passing fancy. Designed in the first place by the brains of hate, it had become fit medium for the words they had heard recorded. From an insignificant disc it had evolved into a thing of vital magnitude, a weapon used by the dead to exact revenge, a monstrous cudgel of which the impact might so easily be fatal.

Miss Browne's glance returned to the golf course stretched out in front of her, and she noticed that there were very few people playing. Mr. Malcolm and that young puppy Paul Norman had left the house nearly an hour before she had herself, to go to play golf; she looked around eagerly in an effort to find them. It did not take her long to spy the tall figure of Paul Norman walking straight up the middle of one of the fairways, but for the life of her she could not see Mr. Malcolm. Suddenly, however, his figure emerged from a bunker, and she saw the pair meet upon the green. They were quite near to her and very close to the house, and Miss Browne thought to herself that they must now be standing on that same tee from which Mr. Malcolm's excessively bad shot had so shattered the nerves and, in fact, the destinies of all those that had been gathered in that room listening to the dread voice of her brother. Watching them, Miss Browne noticed that they paused in conversation for some time on the tee, and then continued their game. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she watched, and through her mind rushed a series of thoughts which were anything but comforting. Miss Browne was not at all sure that she altogether liked the fact that Norman had Mr. Malcolm all to himself for the period of two or three hours which a round of golf must take them.

However, there was nothing that she could do about it, and she watched them idly as they continued their game up the next fairway and towards the next green. Up the next fairway, that is to say, only in so far as Paul Norman was concerned, for Mr. Malcolm seemed to be following a peculiarly vacillating course, and idly it passed through Miss Browne's mind that for him a round of golf must provide about double the exercise that it did for most people. Even as this thought came to her mind, a spot of rain struck her smartly on the very tip of her aquiline nose.

This was no ordinary spot of rain. Miss Browne, expectant of the worst, quickly looked up heavenwards, and for once she had no need to exaggerate, for a cloud as black as any she had ever seen was approaching, apparently out of a completely clear sky, which made it abundantly clear to her that she had no chance whatsoever of returning to the house before the storm would break. Quickly she looked around her to see what possible shelter she could take, and her eyes rested for a moment upon the Martello tower. But then she realized that before she could possibly reach it she would certainly be drenched through, a prospect which did not appeal to her one little bit. Not more than a hundred yards away, however, there was a little copse of trees just fringing the sand dunes, and this obviously would be the best that she could hope for.

Rising to her feet, Miss Browne started to cover the intervening space. But that one drop, that not by any means ordinary drop of rain, had heralded a not by any means ordinary shower. Even as she started to move the rain began to fall, and it fell with an intensity which warned Miss Browne that her trees, although they might keep some of it off, would in all probability be of very little use. However, there was nothing else to be done, and Miss Browne hated to change her mind. She made off to it at a rapid pace, but even as she ran her feet, with practised art, continued to select each patch of ground on which they trod, and as she reached the shelter of the trees, which were already in full foliage, Miss Browne was by no means dry. Here, however, she had a pleasant surprise, for one tree appeared to be infinitely older than any of the others and, as befitted its probable parenthood of the whole copse, its foliage was abundantly more thick. Although the rain was now descending in torrents, under this tree the ground was dry, and beneath its branches Miss Browne took her stand and hoped fervently that there would be no thunder, for with thunder came lightning and with lightning the shelter of a tree became a danger. Miss Browne hated danger almost more than she hated everything else in the world.

With a grim resignation she stood there, crouched as close as she could get to the trunk of the tree, staring out with moody eyes at the torrential, almost tropical, downpour. And through her mind ran that pessimistic and entirely foolish sentence which jumps almost automatically to the lips of all those unprepared travellers upon whom a storm has broken unawares—"Of course it was bound to rain, just because I've left my umbrella at home." With this thought came to her mind a clear vision of the home from which she had come that day, of the long, tedious train journey to this little country place, and, finally, of the grim happenings within the great house whose chimneys she could clearly glimpse between the trees. With a slight shiver, a shiver for which the clinging dampness of her clothes could not entirely be blamed, Miss Browne turned her back upon the house and looked once more over the golf course towards the sea.

Here the gaunt outline of the Martello tower claimed her vision, and on the instant her mind became alert. For, running towards it, their feet covering the ground with a careless abandon, with backs bent almost double in an attempt to shelter their faces from the lashing of the rain, she could see two men hastening in search of shelter. Miss Browne's thin lips widened into a smile, a slightly malicious smile, for even at that distance she had recognized the figures. So they were not to finish their game of golf, then, after all. A few seconds later she saw Paul Norman and Mr. Malcolm vanish within the open doorway of the tower and from her sight.

In the quixotic brain of Miss Kate Browne a quite irrelevant thought was born. Now at last, she told herself, the tower had proved of use. Throughout the years it had rested there, perhaps, for just this same event . . . to prove of shelter to two storm-bound men. Perhaps everything else, although appearing useless, had some time, some moment, of especial import. All inanimate objects perhaps . . . including records, gramophone records . . . and with a shudder of distaste Miss Browne realized that she was back again at the vital subject which had so absorbed her interest. She shook herself free from her thoughts and stared out once more at the rain. With a sigh of pleasure she noted that it was at last ceasing; only one or two drops still fell in a steady drizzle upon the soaking ground. The downpour itself was now over. But Miss Kate Browne extended to the rain that same doubting suspicion which she extended to all other things, and for a while she remained beneath the tree, watching the clouds disperse, reluctant even now to believe that the storm had indeed blown over and was not merely taking breath for a further outburst.

It was when she had at last finally convinced herself that the day had undoubtedly cleared sufficiently to allow of her venturing once more upon her way that her attention was diverted to a vastly different thing. Her eyes had been fixed upon the outline of the tower, and from the open doorway a figure had just emerged, a figure which she knew quite well. There was a strange furtiveness about Paul Norman's manner which awakened all her interest, and with curious eyes she watched him glance quickly, almost apprehensively, around, and then run with rapid steps in the direction of the house.

Miss Browne breathed quickly. Two figures had gone in but only one had emerged, and in the whole demeanour of that one had been a world of desperate purpose. Miss Browne was all attention. A second longer she waited, until the figure of Paul Norman was lost to her behind the trees, and then with eager steps, but with the same fastidiousness of tread, she made her way quickly along the sand dunes towards the grim blackness of the tower. It took her only a few minutes to approach it, and for a second she stood before the door in hesitation, almost in fear.

But for a second only. Very gently, and as silently as the rusty hinges of the old tower door would allow, she pushed it open just sufficiently to allow her to peep through. Could she have known it, Miss Kate Browne presented at that moment the appearance of some inquisitive and cocky little bird investigating the possibility of a worm after rain in some unknown and slightly suspicious spot. Actually her mind may well have been running on very similar lines to that of just such a bird, for in her thoughts there was largely curiosity and largely a desire to know what had befallen that slippery worm Mr. Malcolm.

Through the crack of the door which she had made for herself, Miss Browne decided that she could see nothing of interest except the dim dankness of the inside of the tower. Very carefully she pushed the door a little further open and poked her head through.

In the darkness she could see little, just the bare outline of a room with rounded walls, into which light fell through slits which acted as windows. Dark though it was, enough daylight still lingered in the room to enable her to see that no one was within. There was an unpleasant smell about the place which seemed to chill the air.

Miss Browne decided to venture inside. But even though with her decision she acted instantly, yet her movements were still furtive and inquisitive. She opened the door only just enough to enable her to pass through, and she looked around her quickly the moment she was inside. But again nothing out of the usual could she see, and there was no sign whatsoever of Mr. Malcolm. For a moment or two she stood quite still, allowing her eyes to become accustomed to the darkness within the tower—a darkness which contrasted violently with the bright sunlight, which now was doing its best outside to wipe away all traces of the fantastic storm. This process did not take long, and Miss Browne soon realized that her first impression was correct. Mr. Malcolm, most certainly, was nowhere on the ground floor of the tower.

Never before had Miss Browne been inside a Martello tower, and she looked around her now with an added interest, but beyond the vague outline of a ladder, the first two or three steps of which were clearly visible, she could see nothing to claim her attention. She advanced across the floor towards these steps. Obviously, since Mr. Malcolm was not in the room in which she was standing, and since she had not seen him leave the tower by the only opening which it seemed to afford, he must be somewhere beyond that ladder.

Unhesitatingly now Miss Browne reached the foot of the steps and ascended two of them. But then she stopped. Aided and abetted by the strange and almost furtive behaviour of Paul Norman when she had seen him leave the tower in such a hurry, her imagination had conjured up for her a possibility on which she did not care to dwell. She had too recently left that grim house, wherein her brother, by means of the record, had declared that he had been murdered, to be able to dismiss such thoughts with entire conviction. And she had an unpleasant feeling that Mr. Malcolm was very near at hand, and that Mr. Malcolm, if he was still within human aid, required it greatly. Miss Browne shook herself, literally shook herself, irritated that she should allow such thoughts to run through her mind. But even as she did so, and her reason told her that she was letting her imagination become almost hysterical, yet she could not dismiss the feeling that perhaps when she had advanced up that ladder and attained the floor above her foot might there come into contact with something soft, something that was, or had been, living flesh.

However, Miss Kate Browne was a woman of purpose, and she set herself to mount those steps, perhaps using more than her ordinary caution in the selection of her foothold. Up the ladder she went to the second floor of the tower. This floor, also, was entirely empty, and with a shudder of distaste she proceeded to mount the spiral staircase to the parapet above, reaching the top without any unpleasant incident. Breathing rather heavily, she walked out onto the flat roof and looked around her curiously. The parapet itself was bare; only the slightly raised portion of stone, which once had proudly borne the mighty weight of guns, broke the stark smoothness of its surface. Here there was no sign of Mr. Malcolm—no sign, indeed, that anybody was at that moment within the tower. More mystified than ever, so mystified, in fact, that now Miss Browne's apprehensions had entirely vanished in the interest of her investigations, she descended again into the darkness to the first floor and thence down the ladder once more.

And even as she stepped off the last rung she stood quite still. Something, some strange muffled sound had come to her ears, something which sent a cold shiver down her spine and banished immediately all her curiosity, filling her with a deep regret for ever having ventured within the tower. A strangely muffled, curious noise was coming to her, but for the moment she had no idea whence it came.

Only in that first moment did Miss Browne lose her nerve: the next instant she had recovered and was all attention, straining to hear, standing quite motionless, rather like a stalking hunter very near to its prey. Even as she stood there, from directly beneath her feet there came a knock which seemed to shake her foothold and which made her step back quickly, with a gasp of fear, onto the last rung of the ladder. She looked down at the floor, and then for the first time she realized that there was a trapdoor beneath her on which she had been standing, a trapdoor securely bolted but from which there was coming a faint tap, as though someone imprisoned below were attempting to attract attention.

Miss Browne caught her breath in a deep excitement. So that was it! In her mind there was no doubt whatsoever but that it was Mr. Malcolm whom she would see when the trapdoor had been opened. Here was the reason for Paul Norman's furtive exit, the reason why, though two men had entered that tower, only one of them had emerged. But in spite of her thoughts Miss Kate Browne did not hesitate. Quickly she bent down and slipped back the bolt, which to her surprise worked quite easily, and, exerting all her strength, she pulled at the trapdoor. This also opened far more easily than she had expected, but the reason for this became clear to her even as she opened it, for from below it was being pushed up by means of a long stick. As it came over, Miss Browne let it go, and the door fell back with a dull thud upon the ground. She had expected to see the countenance of Mr. Malcolm immediately emerge from the dark abyss which the removal of the door had effected in the ground, but in this she was disappointed. No sign of him could be seen, and, advancing to the edge, she looked down. She could see nothing, however, for it was all as black as pitch; but evidently Mr. Malcolm, imprisoned below, could see her clearly, for she heard his voice at once.

"Ah! Miss Browne, I think. Thank you so much, Miss Browne. It is really very kind of you to help me in this quaint pass in which I find myself. But I shall require your help a little longer. Can you suggest some means by which I can get out of this prison?"

Miss Browne still looked down into the darkness.

Now, very faintly, very dimly she could just make out the form of Mr. Malcolm standing below.

"How did you get in?" she asked.

"My dear lady," came the tones of Mr. Malcolm —"my dear lady, quite involuntarily, I assure you."

CHAPTER XI

"I DIDN'T think you had locked yourself in," said Miss Browne shortly. "You may be clever, Mr. Malcolm, but I don't think that even you could work a bolt which is on the other side of a closed trapdoor."

She laughed harshly. She was definitely enjoying herself. Here at her mercy was the very man who, only a short time before, had held her, and all those others within that room, completely in his power. This total reversion of positions was very sweet to the heart of Miss Kate Browne, and in her laugh there was a hint of spite and malice. But Mr. Malcolm did not answer her directly, nor did any tinge or faint suggestion of irritation creep into his voice as he replied.

"Let us discuss these matters when we are in a more comfortable position," he said. "If you don't mind my saying so, I have taken a strong dislike to this tower. I shall be obliged if you can think of some method of getting me out."

"I can't lift you out," said Miss Browne. "Can't you reach the top and pull yourself up?"

"An unkind Providence," said Mr. Malcolm, "decreed at my birth that I should neither have the length of arm nor the strength of a gorilla. What you suggest, therefore, while practicable for that excellent animal, is quite useless to me."

Miss Browne looked at the dim figure standing below her, and for a moment she felt a strong desire to leave Mr. Malcolm where he was, even to return the trapdoor to its original position and again to slip the bolt back into place. She knew that she was being made fun of: she was rather astonished that Mr. Malcolm should be able to treat so light-heartedly the difficult position in which he found himself. But Miss Browne had had time for thought since last she had seen this man. She had a definite idea in her head, and as she hated changing her plans almost as much as she disliked changing her mind, she repressed her feelings as well as she could and looked around her.

Almost at once her eyes fell upon a ladder lying in the shadow of the wall.

"Wait a minute," she said.

She walked over to the ladder and picked it up. It was heavy, but she could just manage it. Pushing it from one end, she was able to get it up to the hole in the ground made by the open trapdoor.

"Look out!" she said.

"I can't," said Mr. Malcolm. "I can't see that high."

"Don't be silly," said Miss Browne. "Stand back."

"Ah!" said Mr. Malcolm. "Certainly."

He stood back, but only just in time, for a moment later one end of the ladder struck the ground smartly exactly where he had been standing.

"Now where on earth," said Mr. Malcolm, "did you find such a useful thing?"

"On the floor," said Miss Browne, "and make use of it."

She chuckled. Once again she was enjoying herself.

Mr. Malcolm was not slow to take her advice. Suddenly Miss Browne saw his head appearing, closely followed by his body, until finally he was standing on the floor beside her.

"This is indeed kind of you, Miss Browne," he said. "Goodness knows what might have happened to me had I been stuck in that hole much longer. I assure you the air was getting quite unpleasant, and when I heard somebody walking over the floor above my prison I did all that I could to attract your attention. But to my horror nothing happened."

"That was when I went upstairs," said Miss Browne, "to the roof."

"Pleasant view," said Mr. Malcolm; "I did that, too, just before . . ." He stopped.

"Just before what?" said Miss Browne.

"Just before I fell into that hole," said Mr. Malcolm. "A most displeasing experience. I might have broken my leg or anything."

Miss Browne took one look into the dark hole.

"I don't know how you didn't," she said.

"Ah," said Mr. Malcolm. "A kind Providence looked after me this time, probably trying to make up to me about my arms and strength. I don't think I've hurt myself at all. I've bruised my knee, certainly, but"—he looked down and noted that his trouser leg was not cut—"but I don't think seriously."

There was a pause. Mr. Malcolm looked at Miss Browne. Miss Browne looked at Mr. Malcolm. Finally Mr. Malcolm laughed.

"I don't like the smell in here, do you?" he said. "Let's get out into the fresh air—that is, if it's stopped raining."

"Oh, yes," said Miss Browne, "it's stopped raining."

"Well . . . shall we depart?"

Picking up his clubs, Mr. Malcolm followed Miss Browne out of the door, and was surprised to notice that the sea was now appreciably nearer to the tower than it had been when he had entered the place.

"How odd!" said Mr. Malcolm.

"What's odd?" asked Miss Browne.

"This tower," said Mr. Malcolm, "seems to have been built in the wrong place. Surely at high tide it gets partly submerged?"

"All along this coast," answered Miss Browne, "the sea has been encroaching upon the land. When it was built no doubt it was in an excellent position."

"Oh," said Mr. Malcolm, "I see. I wonder if that lad knew." He paused again.

"Knew what?" asked Miss Browne.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Malcolm. "I seem to have got into the habit of thinking aloud. A most revolting habit. I'm so sorry."

Miss Browne looked at him. Thoughts were flying through her mind as well as through his—thoughts that were probably very similar to his own, but she realized that this was not the time to give voice to them.

They started to walk away from the tower inland by a path which ran along the side of the golf course, and which would eventually lead them past the copse of trees where Miss Browne had sheltered not so very long before and thence back to the house itself.

But when they reached the trees Miss Browne stopped.

"I came out originally," she said, "to have a word with you, Mr. Malcolm."

"Oh, yes?" said Mr. Malcolm politely.

"I wanted to talk to you privately."

"Well," said Mr. Malcolm, "I don't see quite how you were going to do that. I was out playing a round of golf with Paul Norman when the storm broke upon us, and—er—I took shelter in the tower."

Miss Browne was silent for a moment. She was looking at Mr. Malcolm, trying to fathom from his expression whether he had purposely used the singular "I" rather than the plural "we" in his last sentence. Her inquisitiveness had all returned to her. She was anxious, most anxious, to know for certain what had happened within that tower when Mr. Malcolm and Paul Norman had entered it for shelter.

"I hoped to catch you on your way back after you had finished your round," said Miss Browne.

"By the way, you didn't shelter alone in that tower."

"Ah!" said Mr. Malcolm. "I wanted to know how much you knew."

"Did you?" said Miss Browne.

She was determined to give away no more of her knowledge—no more, that is, than was necessary in order to obtain the certainty for which her curiosity yearned.

"Yes," said Mr. Malcolm. "You saw us go in, no doubt."

"I was sitting watching you when the rain came on, and I took shelter here under that tree."

"I see. And from here, of course, you get an excellent view of the tower."

"Yes," said Miss Browne noncommittally.

"It must be rather interesting," went on Mr. Malcolm pensively, "to see two people running for shelter and entering a tower."

"Interesting?" said Miss Browne. "I don't follow."

"Interesting only," said Mr. Malcolm, "if only one comes out."

"Yes," said Miss Browne, slightly flustered. "I must say I was curious."

Mr. Malcolm smiled.

"Thank God for your curiosity, dear lady," he said, "otherwise I should still be there in that beastly cellar, or whatever it was."

"The trapdoor was down," said Miss Browne, "and the bolt was slipped into place."

"I know," said Mr. Malcolm. "Horrible, wasn't it, but . . . well, all's well that ends well."

"Is it ended?" asked Miss Browne.

"Eh?" said Mr. Malcolm, surprised. "Of course it's ended. I'm out. I'm free."

"Yes," said Miss Browne, "but aren't you going to do anything?"

"Do anything?"

"Yes—to Paul Norman for locking you in like that?"

"Oh," said Mr. Malcolm blandly. "Well, I'll ask him why he did it, of course. He may have some perfectly reasonable explanation."

"I don't see how that's possible," said Miss Browne curtly.

"Everything," said Mr. Malcolm, "is possible in this world. It's most extraordinary. Now who, for instance, would have thought it possible that I should hole a full brassie shot from the middle of a bunker? But I did, you know, two years ago and . . ." He paused a moment, and seemed to be counting something on his fingers. ". . . Two years ago one month and one day precisely. You can't be surprised that I should remember that date. I remember I put a red circle round it in my diary."

Miss Browne did not answer. She was irritated with this man, who so evidently was playing with her: she was irritated also with herself, for she had obviously given him all the information which he required, whereas he had given her absolutely none at all in exchange. This did not appear to Miss Browne to be quite fair, but there was something about Mr. Malcolm's manner which, although pleasant, even joking, seemed to contain a hint of authority which prevented her from pursuing the subject, much as her curiosity impelled her to.

"What did you want to see me about?" asked Mr. Malcolm. "Privately?"

Miss Browne hesitated a moment before replying. The difficult part of her self-imposed task was now about to be done, and she wanted to make quite sure that she should make no false move which would give the quick brain of the man to whom she was talking a chance to glean more than she wished him to. But suddenly she made up her mind. There was no point in putting off the evil moment any longer, and the sooner she got through with it the better pleased would she be, provided she could get her own way in the matter.

"Listen, Mr. Malcolm," she said. "I know I behaved very stupidly, perhaps you will think very strangely until I have explained myself, but—er—I have a confession to make to you."

"And what better setting for a confession?" said Mr. Malcolm. "The green leaves only to hear and the old trunks so much senior to make them keep silent."

"Don't talk," said Miss Browne. "I can't think if you interrupt me."

"I'm so sorry," said Mr. Malcolm, "so very sorry. I shan't utter another word."

"I took that record," said Miss Browne.

"Did you really?" said Mr. Malcolm. "But I beg your pardon. I really won't speak any more."

"Yes," said Miss Browne. "I took that record."

"Why?" said Mr. Malcolm.

"I was just going to tell you," said Miss Browne irritably.

"Dear lady," said Mr. Malcolm, "please forgive me, but you have startled me so much and I am so keen to know."

"I took that record," said Miss Browne, "because I've known something of the relationship between Alaris and my dead brother, and I wanted, if possible, to save her pain and trouble."

"While entirely meritorious," said Mr. Malcolm, "I fail to see how you could achieve either object by your action."

"We all make mistakes . . ." said Miss Browne.

"Certainly," said Mr. Malcolm. "I fell into a cellar."

". . . and I agree with you that my action was not for the best, but, on the other hand, I meant it to be."

"When did you take the record?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"I took it when Mr. Yarrow moved away from the gramophone, having stopped the record after your golf ball made its sudden appearance in the room. I was sitting quite close to the machine. It only required a pace for me to get it and hide it under the carpet."

"So that's where it was," said Mr. Malcolm.

"Yes, that's where it was," said Miss Browne.

"No wonder I couldn't find it," said Mr. Malcolm.

"At the time," said Miss Browne, "I couldn't understand why you didn't. However, I didn't want to risk the rest of what my brother might have said in that record. He might have said almost anything about that poor girl. He was, I think, a little mad, you know."

"Yes," said Mr. Malcolm, "we've got the doctor's evidence for that."

"They never got on, really. I could never understand why he adopted her when she was small. But she was the daughter of a very old friend of his youth, and perhaps for once in his life he felt a sense of duty when she was orphaned."

"That may well have been it," said Mr. Malcolm heartily.

"But he hated her and he was cruel to her always."

"Yes," said Mr. Malcolm. "As a matter of fact I know that. I noticed it when I dined here or when I saw them together. I don't think she led a happy life."

"I'm quite sure she didn't," said Miss Browne. "And . . . well, it was just to save her trouble that I did it."

"You know," said Mr. Malcolm quietly, "I think that was very kind of you, very kind indeed, but it's an awful pity that you did it. However, now that you've confessed and told me all about it I don't think we need trouble any more except that we must hear that record through. As I have pointed out before, we can always assume, if necessary, that the coroner's verdict was correct, and that your brother was insane when he made the record."

"Yes, I see all that now," said Miss Browne, "but I'm afraid that we can't do that."

"Can't?" said Mr. Malcolm. "Why?"

"Because I've lost the record," said Miss Browne quietly.

She watched Mr. Malcolm, watched him for some sign of startled astonishment, but rather to her irritation he gave none.

"You've lost it?" he said quietly. "Lost it? That's most extraordinary. How have you done that?"

"I don't know," said Miss Browne quickly. "I haven't the slightest idea, but when after lunch—everybody else was outside the house—I found a moment to go back to that room and lift up the carpet to get the record, it wasn't there."

"Wasn't there?" said Mr. Malcolm.

"No," said Miss Browne, "that's what I said. It wasn't there."

For a few moments Mr. Malcolm remained quite silent, deep in thought. Miss Browne respected this silence, and did not venture a remark which might have broken the trend of his thoughts. But after a little, when Mr. Malcolm seemed to be showing no signs whatsoever of emerging from his mental deliberations, she at last broke the silence.

"Mr. Malcolm," she said, and it was immediately noticeable that her voice had changed entirely. It was appealing now, almost pleading with him, very different from the harsh tones in which she usually pronounced her words. "Mr. Malcolm, I've told you all I know. I've told you that I did this thing for the best. I'm terribly sorry that it's all gone wrong, but I have definitely made my confession. Is it necessary for me to go back to that beastly house? You've no idea how it's got on my nerves. I want to go away now . . . to go back to my own home."

"But, my dear lady," said Mr. Malcolm, "there's no reason why you shouldn't. You've told me all you know. That's splendid! It will help enormously, I'm sure. I'll have to find the record before I myself can leave, but there's no reason why you should go back. You'll have to promise me one thing, however."

"What is that?" said Miss Browne.

A mixture of apprehension, apprehension as to what this promise might entail, and joy at her release was very evident in her voice.

"I only want one thing," said Mr. Malcolm. "I want you to promise me that you won't leave your home. I don't mean to go out for a walk or anything of that sort, but not to spend more than a few consecutive hours away from it until I give you the word. You see, it may be necessary for me to get hold of you again."

"Oh, yes," said Miss Browne, "certainly I won't go away."

"Ah," said Mr. Malcolm. "Then this is au revoir, Miss Browne."

"Or—good-bye!" she said, with a sudden return to her normal asperity.

"Or good-bye," said Mr. Malcolm, "and I don't blame you for hoping so. Alaris knows your address?"

"Yes," said Miss Browne.

"Right—that's splendid. Well, again a thousand thanks, Miss Browne. Without you"—Mr. Malcolm shuddered slightly—"I should still be in that dark dank hole. I hate dark dank holes, don't you?"

"Personally," said Miss Browne, "I don't use them."

"And personally," said Mr. Malcolm, with just a touch of venom in his voice, "neither do I . . . on purpose."

Mr. Malcolm and Miss Browne shook hands. Miss Browne turned to walk across the golf course towards the station.

"Have you anything in the house?" said Mr. Malcolm.

"I'm not going to that house again," said Miss Browne shortly.

"Can I send anything on?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"There is nothing to send on," said Miss Browne.

"Are you going to walk across the golf course?" asked Mr. Malcolm. "That shower has made things a bit damp, you know. I'm afraid you'll get your feet very wet."

"Not for the first time," said Miss Browne pertly.

"and, anyway, I won't get cold feet. That's not the reason that I want to get away."

Mr. Malcolm laughed. Mr. Malcolm laughed very heartily, not so much at this sample of so-called humour, but because of it, coming so unexpectedly from the austere lips of Kate Browne.

He watched her go.

CHAPTER XII

When Miss Browne had traversed a hundred yards or so of her journey to the station, Mr. Malcolm turned and continued his walk along the path towards the house. He was very thoughtful, and a slight frown lined his forehead. Evidently he was absorbed in his thoughts, and a casual observer might have inferred that the confession of Miss Kate Browne had not been altogether to Mr. Malcolm's liking. Apparently, instead of clearing up the matter, it had, if anything, made things even more complicated. It was almost as if his preconceived ideas on the whole mystery were of necessity to undergo a change, a change which Mr. Malcolm did not desire. But it did not take him long to reach the house, and by the time that he had entered the front door all sign of any frown had vanished, any outward symbol of perplexity had completely disappeared.

Mr. Malcolm went straight to the fateful sitting room, opened the door, and entered it. He looked around him quickly, expecting to see the faces of all those who, by his decree, had been forbidden to leave the vicinity, for it was just about the hour which he had chosen for the renewal of their considerations. But Mr. Malcolm noticed at once that the meeting had been reduced in size by over half, for the only people present were Angela Browne and her husband, the Colonel, and the small figure of Mr. Yarrow, the solicitor. Even as he entered, all three rose to their feet and started to talk at him.

"Now then," said Mr. Malcolm. "Please! If I'm to hear what any one of you has to say you mustn't all speak at once. Now, then, Mr. Yarrow has something on his mind."

For answer Mr. Yarrow held out an envelope.

"We found this," he said, "in here when we came."

"Oh!" said Mr. Malcolm.

He looked at it: it was addressed to himself.

"For me, I see."

"Where are the others?" boomed the Colonel.

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Mr. Malcolm. "Where do you think they could be?"

"Gone . . . bolted," said the Colonel. "Worthless—all of them! What a family you married into, my dear!"

He turned to his wife with a smile.

Mr. Malcolm, who had been about to open the envelope, suddenly paused. It was the Colonel's voice which had arrested the motion of his fingers, for there was a new tone altogether in the way in which he had addressed the words to his wife. Mr. Malcolm, his eyes half closed, was thinking rapidly. Something obviously had been settled between these two, something which probably had been a shadow between them for many years. For even as he watched them out of the corner of his eye, apparently looking at the letter in his hand, Mr. Malcolm noticed that Angela Browne surreptitiously slid her hand into that of her husband just for a second and laughed deprecatingly. Yes, the pair of them, there was no doubt about that, were on far better terms than Mr. Malcolm had ever seen them before. He put off the opening of his letter for a moment longer.

"It's not quite fair to say that," said Mr. Malcolm. "You see, Colonel, your sister, after a conversation which she and I have just had on the sandhills, has received my permission to leave. She has made a full explanation to me of her part in the affair."

"Oh, she has, has she?" said the Colonel.

"Yes, has she? She has!" said Mr. Malcolm shortly. He had no desire to give any further particulars, and, as he had expected, the shortness of his voice curbed the Colonel's curiosity.

"There are, however," said Mr. Malcolm, "three others, the whereabouts of whom I should like to know. Vivien Waugh, for instance."

"That's his writing," said Angela Browne unexpectedly, pointing to the envelope.

"Oh, perhaps he explains within, then," said Mr. Malcolm; "but Alaris and that young fellow Paul Norman?"

"Alaris," said Angela Browne, "is upstairs in her room resting. She went up after lunch."

"Perhaps the poor girl has gone to sleep," suggested Mr. Malcolm, "and hasn't run away at all. Will someone go and see?"

"I will," said Angela Browne.

She rose to her feet and left the room immediately.

"I thought you were playing golf with Norman," said the Colonel aggressively.

"I was," said Mr. Malcolm, "but then the rain came on, and—er—we parted. It wasn't worth going on. Has anybody seen him?"

"I haven't," said Mr. Yarrow.

"Neither have I," said the Colonel, "and I know my wife hasn't. She was with me all the afternoon."

"Very odd," said Mr. Malcolm; "however, perhaps he also will make his explanation later. In any case, we are very punctual. We must give them a few minutes' grace before we think too harshly of them."

The door opened at this moment and Angela Browne reëntered.

"Alaris is not in her room," she said.

"Not in her room," said Mr. Malcolm; "that means she is out of it. Dear, dear, how very provoking!"

"I don't believe she's run away," said Angela Browne unexpectedly.

She was always making unexpected remarks. Mr. Malcolm looked at her.

"I don't believe it either," he said. "As a matter of fact, I have a vague idea of what may be delaying her. We must give them a few minutes' grace, as I have said. In the meantime I propose to read this letter."

Mr. Malcolm moved over to the chair which he had originally occupied during that morning's session and sat himself down. Then, slitting open the envelope, he withdrew a sheet of notepaper, unfolded it, and read the manuscript slowly:

If you have tears to shed, prepare to shed them now. . . . This is the sad account of a poor young man's misguided life. I, Vivien Waugh, first saw the light of day nearly thirty years ago one Christmas Eve. What is all this to do with me? you will mutter coldly. But, Mr. Malcolm, all that I ask of you is that you should read on. It will be worth it—that I promise you. And since this is my tale I shall tell it in a manner of my choosing.

I was born with no silver spoon protruding from my mouth, merely some cheap imitation, something far inferior to an honest copper, for it artificially imposed upon me the appearance of richness without its comforting reality. Thus, throughout a turbulent life, all my desires have been silver ones, but in my pocket only base coins could I find to jingle a chorus of tinkling mendicancy. Thus, all my life have I been an adventurer, a pirate ship ransacking the coffers of the world under the banner of my own skull and cross-bones. *Chacun pour soi* has been my guiding motto, and but for you, Mr. Malcolm, so would it still continue to be until a silvery head might have brought the semblance of that precious metal somewhere within my ken. But for you . . . But I am afraid that this diffuseness must be somewhat boresome, and as Vivien Waugh was never a bore in life, let him not, therefore, be this pestilential thing in . . . but that comes later.

To be brief . . . three months ago, the emptiness of my pockets causing a draught of cold discomfort to enter and corrode my soul, I made out a draught of a somewhat different complexion to the tune of five hundred pounds, which bade the wolf depart from my threshold for at least a little while. A less while, however, than the money might have lasted me, for when my late uncle discovered that a cheque for five pounds which, in a moment of mental aberration, he had sent me had been decorated with a further couple of noughts and a little extra writing (the said embellishments having failed to attract any inconvenient attention at his bank) . . . well, the fat was in the fire, the steam was roaring from the kettle, and me, poor goose, was a fit prey for my ganderous uncle.

So now, dear Mr. Malcolm, now you hold the key to the whole mystery. Were you not a very clever man—I regret that I suspect it strongly—this key would never have thus been placed within your hands, but that you would eventually secure it I am convinced, and suspense being a thing that I abhor . . .

Having discovered that I had rooked him to the extent of no less than four hundred and ninety-five quidlets, my dear uncle proposed to bring me up for trial if the money was not returned by a week ago today. A natural dislike of stone walls, early hours, plain bread, and untainted water forced me to seek around for some speedy means whereby I could repay—the money, alas! had long since been bespoke. With a reluctance born of my overwhelming antipathy for the lady in question, I placed my heart and hand at the feet of a certain Miss X— the name you needn't worry about; it doesn't matter to you. She was plain, she was weighty and witless, her hands were dreadful and her legs were awful, but otherwise she was most attractive. However, I was willing to marry her and make an honest man of me, because within her bank lay the wherewithal that all my life I have so sorely needed. Miss X, with an alacrity born of desperation, accepted me, and all had now been well were it not for the utter callousness with which my uncle received the news. In spite of all my princely expectations he still insisted that were the five hundred not forthcoming by the night in question he would clap me into gaol and inform Miss X of her "escape," as he most ungallantly described it.

So now you know all, for I feel sure, my dear Mr. Malcolm, that a gentleman of your so evident sagacity has guessed long since the riddle of my lamented uncle's death. Yes, it was I who shot him (having failed in a tactful attempt to borrow the cash from my adoring fiancée). I waited until he had gone to bed, and then, hidden behind the door, I shot at his head upon the pillow. Without even entering the room, Mr. Malcolm, without any fear of leaving finger marks! Thus I shot him . . . I, the late Vivien Waugh, for by the time that you read these words my body, sadly mutilated, I am distressed to think, will be lending a further attraction to the seagulls at the Devil's Leap. Over this most unpleasing drop I am about to drive my car, for the thought of a trial for murder and a hanging by the neck until I am dead does not appeal, and with a man like you that trial looms up as a most vivid probability.

But I bear you no ill will. That is like me . . . generous to the last.

Yours,
VIVIEN WAUGH.

Mr. Malcolm looked up from his reading, looked round at the Colonel.

"You were wrong, Colonel," he said, "when you mentioned that all your family were entirely worthless. One of them is a very brave rogue."

He spoke very slowly, very distinctly, but there was a depth of feeling in his voice which struck silence into the Colonel and made him respect the reproof.

But on the next instant Mr. Malcolm became alert, very quick, his manner entirely different from what it had been on completing the reading of that letter. Suddenly he jumped to his feet.

"You have a car outside, Colonel?"

"I have."

"I shall require it."

"But . . ." expostulated the Colonel.

"There is no but," said Mr. Malcolm. "I don't think that's original, but it's very true. I shall be back as soon as I can. Please don't leave the house until I return."

He ran to the door, pulled it open, and hastened outside to the front drive. Leaping into the Colonel's car, he noted, with pleasure, that it was a high-powered sporting model of a make with which he was familiar.

Mr. Malcolm pressed the starting knob: the self-starter did the rest. Mr. Malcolm slipped the gear into place and let in the clutch. The car moved forward, and Mr. Malcolm, at a pace which the drive to that grim house had probably never experienced before, left the vicinity.

CHAPTER XIII

Mr. Malcolm could not drive very fast for the first mile of his journey, for the road only served the house and a few cottages, and it was none too good. But just beyond the golf club it merged into the main road, and, turning into this, Mr. Malcolm let the fast car which he was driving show its paces. He had about seven miles to go and time was very precious. Mr. Malcolm now began to wish that he had delayed just sufficiently to inquire at what time that letter had been left, for his journey might well be fruitless if Vivien Waugh had taken too long a start in which to execute himself. As it was, Mr. Malcolm realized that he would almost certainly be too late unless he was very lucky, or unless the resolution of the young man should fail him for a few moments before he committed the fatal deed. This, however, was quite likely, for, as Mr. Malcolm had read Vivien Waugh's character, it occurred to him that although he would not put off his purpose indefinitely, he might well stay his hand for quite an appreciable time on reaching the last stage of his self-imposed task in order to consider the why and wherefore of all that had happened, perhaps, in particular, the stirring moments of that very day.

The Devil's Leap was a well-known landmark of the district. Towering several thousand feet above the sea, bleak and desolate in its lonely grandeur, it was at this peak that the cliffs, which on either side fronted the ocean for many miles, reached their highest point. The ground sloped upwards with a sudden precipitous rapidity, rising many hundred feet in less than half a mile, and on the top, rather surprisingly, was to be found no inaccessible crag, but a circular level plateau upon which many people might foregather at one time, staring out over the grey ocean to that far horizon, where, on clear days, the white cliffs of France could sometimes faintly be seen. No country place which values its self-respect dare remain untinged with eerie legend, and thus it was that about this lonely plateau, around which the great gulls wheeled in endless flight and which they had long established for themselves as a resting place, the very footprints of the Arch Fiend himself might still be seen, marked deeply in the rock—visible proof, so ran the tale, that on this very crag the Devil had once been trapped.

Long years ago in the Middle Ages, when satanic rites and witchcraft worked fell deeds within the land, deeds of which no man might hear unmoved, one valiant monk had lured the Devil to this lonely spot and, with the aid of a magic circle made by holy water, had forced him to remain a prisoner for exactly a year and one day. Thus were his footprints left indelibly on the ground, grim mementoes of his infernal visit. And on the final evening—the power of that holy water having now become exhausted—the Devil turned his back upon the land and jumped into the sea . . . down . . . down . . . until his weight, reaching the sands beneath, caused them to sink until a deep hole had been formed, a hole over which only a hardy swimmer might now risk his life in safety. For even at low tide the waves were always angry at this spot, lashing the cliffs until their spray mounted high up the crumbling sides.

It was to this awesome peak that Mr. Malcolm hastened, driving his car now at a speed which left no margin for a sudden turn, no loophole of escape should he be met by any other car speeding around a corner in the opposite direction. But of all this Mr. Malcolm gave no thought. Time was slipping from him all too quickly, and with a tightening of his lips he recalled to mind the wording of that letter, and stared before him eagerly at the massive peak, fearing at every moment that from the top he might see—even at the distance he was from it—a minute speck fall into space down to those whirlpool currents that swirled so dangerously below.

He was racing now along a winding road which led directly to the Devil's Leap. With a careless disregard for coming traffic, which, in any other driver, would have made him, in a saner moment, gasp with horror, he swung around each bend. The road was clear, however, and the speedometer of his borrowed car remained steadily almost at maximum for over half the journey. At last Mr. Malcolm reached the final bend. On the instant he applied the brakes and turned off his engine. Quickly he alighted and ran rapidly along the road towards the enormous height which towered above him. Mr. Malcolm stood a moment staring up at the cliff and a rough road which spiralled its sides right to the summit.

"Take too long," he muttered to himself.

He looked at the gorse-covered sides of the peak, and his eyes caught the faint white ribbon of a tiny path which ascended it, starting but a few yards from where he was standing. He could see only a little way along this, for it was soon lost to sight within the bushes, but Mr. Malcolm paused not a moment longer. Running lightly to the path, he began to mount it at a rapid pace, a pace which lasted him only for a very little while, however, for the cliff was precipitous and the day hot. After he had mounted about twenty yards of his way, Mr. Malcolm found, to his disappointment, that the path led on no farther. Only a tangled mass of prickly bushes lay before him, and with his breath coming rapidly in painful gasps, Mr. Malcolm started to cleave a way between them. The task was not an easy one, and it was after what seemed an eternity of laborious climbing that at length he arrived upon the summit.

There he lay flat upon the ground and wriggled forward towards a clump of gorse bushes which lay before him. Sheltered behind these, he softly pushed aside some of the branches and peered out onto the lonely plateau of the Devil's Leap.

What he saw filled Mr. Malcolm with a great relief, for upon the very edge of the cliff was Vivien Waugh, standing staring down into the sea below, while fifty yards or so away his car was drawn up on the exact spot where the winding road at last attained the top. Even as he caught sight of him, Mr. Malcolm crouched down still lower. He did not want to be observed just yet. His thoughts were rather mixed, for one side of him admired the cool courage of a man who could examine, in the few last moments which remained to him of life, the very place and method in which he was to take it; rather against his will, he could not but admire that sense of the dramatic, or, perhaps better, the melodramatic, which had made Vivien Waugh choose this way out of his troubles. Here was a setting which indeed was grand: the sun had now reached the level of the horizon, and lay, like a great red ball, upon the surface of the waters. Its light, falling upon that desolate peak, imbued the whole place with a splendour all its own, a majestic, even a startling beauty, which to the dazzled eyes of Mr. Malcolm made it all appear almost unreal. In very truth Vivien Waugh had chosen his exit well.

Yet on the other side there remained the worthlessness of the young man's character, that craving for the money which he had not got, a craving which had made of him a forger and a thief, ready to sell himself and the happiness of his future wife for the satisfaction of this selfsame greed; which had made of him, above all else, a murderer in intent if not actually in deed. In spite of all this, against all his better judgment, there still lingered in Mr. Malcolm's mind a reluctant admiration for a man who could face defeat with such good humour, a man who hesitated not at all to accept it and all that it entailed even before proof had been obtained against him.

"He's a gambler," said Mr. Malcolm to himself. "Just a gambler—but *what* a gambler!"

But his thoughts were brought to an abrupt conclusion, for even as he watched him, Vivien Waugh turned from the edge of the cliff and walked with rapid steps back to his car. Evidently he had now decided that there was no point in clinging to life any longer: evidently he had made up his mind that the zero hour had come and that he must at once make his last grand gesture.

And even as he started to walk, Mr. Malcolm, who was close beside the car, very silently rose up from the bushes behind which he had been hidden and started to walk just as rapidly across the intervening space. It was some moments before Vivien Waugh caught sight of him; but when he did, he stopped dead. Mr. Malcolm hesitated for a second only, and then he altered his direction slightly in order to cut off Vivien Waugh completely from his car. But apparently the other had realized this intention, for he suddenly broke into a run, attempting to reach the car and perhaps get it started before

Mr. Malcolm could interfere. Mr. Malcolm, however, was not going to allow himself to be cheated at this last moment. He also broke into a run, and it immediately became obvious to Vivien Waugh that he could not achieve his purpose. With a shrug of his shoulders which, even at that distance, Mr. Malcolm could clearly see, Vivien Waugh stopped running and walked in a leisurely fashion towards Mr. Malcolm.

When they were within a yard of each other both stopped as if by common consent, and for a few moments neither spoke. But Mr. Malcolm stared into the other man's eyes, stared hard in an effort to find that hint of insanity which usually accompanies such an act as Vivien Waugh had contemplated. But there was none. The man was as debonair as ever, and in his eyes, strangely enough, there was even the suspicion of a smile.

"Well," said Mr. Malcolm, "I got your letter."

"So I perceive," said Vivien Waugh. "Had I thought that you would get it so soon and act so promptly perhaps I might have acted with less deliberation."

"What were you doing on the edge of that cliff?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"Thinking," said Vivien Waugh.

"Of what?"

"I was wondering," said the young man, "whether all those stories that one is told in early youth are true."

"What sort of stories?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"Oh, stories of an after-life . . . of what would happen."

"Of what would happen?"

It was a question, and Vivien Waugh accepted it as such.

"Yes—after I'd gone over, I mean."

"You know," said Mr. Malcolm, "you're a prize fool."

"Of course I am," said Vivien Waugh. "I've always been. If I were just an ordinary fool it wouldn't have mattered so much."

"And you've got a prize conceit of yourself," said Mr. Malcolm.

"Of course I have," said Vivien Waugh. "What on earth's the good of a man who hasn't?"

"You wanted to commit suicide," said Mr. Malcolm deliberately, "and you choose the most spectacular manner in which it can be done."

"And exhilarating," said Vivien Waugh. "Awful fun, you know, I should think, going like hell over the cliff and down . . . down . . ."

"A long way down, I should say," said Mr. Malcolm, "even after death."

"Don't be rude," said Vivien Waugh, "and don't be uncharitable. Remember, we're supposed to think the best we can of our neighbours . . . and nothing is a certainty."

"I'm doing my best," said Mr. Malcolm, "to think the best I can of you, but you're presenting a task which is almost insurmountable."

"I always have," said Vivien Waugh. "Sometimes I feel quite sorry for my uncle. I've been a pest to him ever since I was born."

He paused a moment. Mr. Malcolm could find nothing to say to this strange young man. He was wondering how to broach the subject which was on the tip of his tongue, and he found it difficult. His thoughts, however, were largely shattered by a typical remark from his companion:

"But rather a nice pest, you know."

Vivien Waugh waited for a moment after these words and watched the other's face. Then he laughed, and in that laugh Mr. Malcolm had the first hint of the strain under which the young man was labouring; for it was rather wild, pitched in a key which was just a little way on the wrong side of that border line which is called Normality.

"You can't quite make me out, can you, Mr. Malcolm?" he asked. "Well, I'm not surprised. But I don't know why you've come here. To cheat me from my own end? . . . to make me last a little longer? To put me within those prison walls which I hate?" His voice was rising. "To hang me by a rope until I am dead?"

"Shut up," said Mr. Malcolm shortly. "No, I haven't come here for that at all."

Vivien Waugh stared at him almost as if he were unable to believe his ears, as if they were mischievously telling him something which Mr. Malcolm had never said.

"Don't look so surprised," said Mr. Malcolm with a smile. "It doesn't suit you. You're the sort of person who should go through the world without surprises, except of your own making."

Vivien Waugh recognized at once that Mr. Malcolm was helping him. He regained his composure and bowed.

"Thank you," he said.

"What I've come here for," said Mr. Malcolm, "is to prevent you from taking that joy ride over the cliff. I see no point in adding—to use your own words—more fodder for the gulls. They're well fed enough already."

"Excuse me," said Vivien Waugh, "but there's every point if I'm to be hung by a rope."

"Yes," said Mr. Malcolm, "but I'm afraid you may escape that end, much as you richly deserve it."

"Oh," said Vivien Waugh, "and how do I escape it? You don't mean to say that a man of your integrity is about to betray his trust and let me off?"

"What trust?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"The implicit trust," said Vivien Waugh, "which is placed in you by the police."

"Bilge!" said Mr. Malcolm.

"It isn't," said Vivien Waugh. "You can't fool me."

"Bilge!" said Mr. Malcolm again. "I don't mean that I'm not connected with the police. I see you've guessed that, but I do mean that I would never betray any trust."

"That's what I thought," said Vivien Waugh. "But in that case how do you square it out?"

"Very easily," said Mr. Malcolm. "I'm here to find the murderer of Peter Browne."

"Well," said Vivien Waugh, "he stands before you."

"Much as I should like," said Mr. Malcolm, "to accept this pleasantly easy way out, I can't do it."

"Oh!" said Vivien Waugh. "And why?"

"Because," said Mr. Malcolm deliberately, "the shot which you confess to in your letter did not kill Mr. Browne."

This time there was no suggestion of affectation about Vivien Waugh's surprise. He stared at Mr. Malcolm, apparently quite unable to believe his ears or to understand what he was being told.

"But . . ." he stammered, "but I *shot* him."

"You shot *at* him," said Mr. Malcolm.

"Do you mean"—there was a dawning hope in Vivien Waugh's voice—"do you mean . . . I missed him?"

"That's precisely what I do mean," said Mr. Malcolm. "Don't tell me you're a good shot. I'll assume that, but you missed him all right. The shot which you say you fired from the door at Peter Browne did not kill him . . . didn't even hit him. Now aren't you pleased that you deliberated on that cliffside? Aren't you pleased that I came along?"

He smiled, but even as he did so he stepped forward quickly, for Vivien Waugh was very near collapse.

Mr. Malcolm took him by the arm and helped him to the car, pushed him in and down upon a seat.

"Listen to me, Waugh," he said. "You're a damn fool and you've had a very lucky escape. But you confess to a shot which could not possibly have killed your uncle, and as I am only searching for the murderer I'm not interested in your forgery."

For a long moment there was silence, a silence during which Vivien Waugh, his face white and set, strove to recover himself. At last he spoke:

"Then you're no longer interested in me?" he said.

"On the contrary," said Mr. Malcolm. "I'm thoroughly interested in you. You see, I want your help."

CHAPTER XIV

"THE first thing to do," said Mr. Malcolm, when he was seated beside Vivien Waugh, who was at the driving wheel of his own car, "is to get down away from this spot. I don't think either of us likes it very much."

Vivien Waugh shuddered.

"I confess," he said, "that I am fond enough of life to appreciate my escape. I can't thank you sufficiently."

"Not at all," said Mr. Malcolm punctiliously, as if he had merely picked up the other's glove. "I left the car I came in down a bend of the road and climbed the cliff."

"Good Lord!" said Waugh. "That must have been a bit of a sweat."

"It was," said Mr. Malcolm feelingly, "particularly on a hot day like this. However . . . it had to be done."

"Thank you again, Mr. Malcolm," said Vivien Waugh.

"For nothing," said Mr. Malcolm. "Excuse the literal translation. I left the car in rather a pretty spot."

"On purpose?" asked Vivien Waugh, with a smile.

"No . . . convenient," said Mr. Malcolm; "besides, I thought there was a path up the cliff. There wasn't—at least, not for more than twenty yards. There we can talk for a little while."

Vivien Waugh backed his car to the rough road which he had used to reach the top of the cliff, and down this they went very carefully. It was a new car, the tonneau being enclosed but the front seats protected only by the windshield, and the pride of a recently acquired possession was evidently still with the young man, for he was very careful to avoid the worst of the poor surface of the road. They turned onto the main road, and Waugh drove back in the direction in which he had come. Not more than a quarter of an hour farther on they came upon the Colonel's car. Vivien Waugh drew up on the same side of the road and both men jumped out. As he did so, Mr. Malcolm noticed that his companion cast a quick glance up at the great cliff towering above them and shuddered slightly. Mr. Malcolm smiled to himself. Perhaps this was going to be a good lesson to the worthless young man who stood beside him, whose life he had just saved, and who, in spite of all his villainy, Mr. Malcolm could not quite help rather liking.

"Now look here, Waugh," he said. "I'm going to tell you just a very little of what I know, and I shall want you to give me all the information that you can. In that way you may be useful to me."

They crossed the road and sat down on the opposite bank.

"You didn't kill your uncle when you fired that shot at him," began Mr. Malcolm abruptly, "for a reason which I cannot conceive, unless you are a bad shot."

"I'm not that," said Vivien Waugh. "When I was in the army that was about the one thing at which I was proficient."

"Revolver shooting?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"Yes. Every year I qualified as marksman."

"Strange," said Mr. Malcolm. "I don't quite understand it, unless, of course, your uncle wasn't in bed."

"Oh, but he was," said Waugh. "True, I opened the door just for a moment and very cautiously, but I had a good look at the bed, and although I couldn't make out anything distinctly, I'm fairly certain—I was absolutely certain at the time—that my uncle was lying in bed."

"He couldn't, I suppose," said Mr. Malcolm musingly, "have heard or seen your advent and left the bed?"

"I suppose he could have," said Vivien Waugh; "it's on the cards, but I wouldn't have been so satisfied that I had accomplished my object had I not been absolutely certain. I thought I saw someone lying in the bed, anyway."

"What did you do?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"I had a silencer on my revolver," said Vivien Waugh. "As a matter of fact it wasn't a revolver, it was an automatic. I took careful aim and pulled the trigger. I had plenty of time, you see. There was no one about. The gun made a click and I heard the plaster fall from the wall. I remember thinking at the time that the bullet must have gone clean through his head. I shut the door again and left."

"Tell me," said Mr. Malcolm, "didn't you feel... well, in the least ashamed of what you'd done? Didn't it make you feel rather sick?"

"Good Lord, no!" said Vivien Waugh. "I'm not squeamish, you know."

"No—but a human life," said Mr. Malcolm.

Vivien Waugh laughed.

"I'm not heartless either, Mr. Malcolm," he said, "but I'd nothing but hate searing my soul with regard to my uncle. Always he'd been absolutely beastly to me. Never had he shown me the slightest affection or even understanding. I wouldn't have minded so much had he done just one little thing for me some time in my life—uncles sometimes do, you know—but he never did. All his actions were designed to make things unpleasant and uncomfortable for me. I don't suppose you understand the meaning of the word 'hate,' but I do . . . God! . . . I do!"

"You don't regret having attempted to kill him?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"Not in the least."

Vivien Waugh paused thoughtfully; then he voiced his thoughts:

"I'd do it again, or rather"—he laughed—"I'd try to do it again, if he were still alive."

"A displeasing sentiment," said Mr. Malcolm.

"I'm sorry to hear you say it. But I want to tell you something."

"Yes?"

"Your bullet hit the wall and made the plaster fly, as you described, but on the way it didn't go through your uncle's head."

"How do you know that?" asked Vivien Waugh.

"I know it for a very good reason," said Mr. Malcolm. "A bullet that has gone through a human head makes more than a bullet mark in a wall. You know what I mean?"

"Yes," Vivien Waugh laughed, "I know what you mean."

"There was only a bullet mark on that wall," said Mr. Malcolm quietly.

"I can't understand it," said Vivien Waugh, "and I'll tell you why, Mr. Malcolm. I wasn't nervous . . . I wasn't disturbed . . . I was conscious only of a great joy at doing something which I felt was strongly deserved. My hand wasn't shaking—in fact, I suffered from none of the usual symptoms of nerves. I fired at exactly where his head should have been. Unless he were lying in a most unnatural position I must have hit him somewhere. I waited for a second or two after firing to make quite sure that I hadn't missed; but there was no noise, no noise at all, and I know he was in bed just a moment or two before I opened the door."

"How do you know that?" asked Mr. Malcolm quickly.

"I know that because I waited for Alaris. She always went to see him before he went to sleep, to give him his medicine or tuck him up comfortably in bed, and while I waited for my opportunity she left his room, presumably having completed her duties."

"Oh," said Mr. Malcolm thoughtfully. "Alaris again."

"What do you mean—'Alaris again'?" asked Vivien Waugh sharply.

"Nothing," said Mr. Malcolm.

"Oh, yes, you do," said Vivien Waugh. "And I don't believe it was Alaris who did it. She wouldn't . . . she's a nice girl. Seems funny for me to talk like this, I suppose, but I know she is."

"So do I," said Mr. Malcolm. "Yet . . . Alaris again."

Vivien Waugh looked at him. This strange man was, at times, quite incomprehensible, but the young man decided that there was no point in pursuing this line of thought. Evidently Mr. Malcolm had not meant what Waugh had thought him to mean by those words.

"I'm going to tell you another thing," said Mr. Malcolm suddenly. "Your uncle was killed by the second shot of two."

"*What?*" said Vivien Waugh, instantly alert.

"Yes," said Mr. Malcolm. "I know it's astonishing, but it's true. Somebody fired very close beside him. You know the effect that that has upon a human head."

Pictures of the war came quickly to Vivien Waugh's mind, grim pictures of what he had seen when in the trenches.

"Yes, I know," he said soberly.

"That is why I was so certain," said Mr. Malcolm, "that your shot had not killed your uncle. That—and the fact that a second shot had been fired. You didn't notice anyone else in the room?"

Vivien Waugh laughed.

"Don't be silly," he said. "Should I have fired if I had?"

"Of course not," said Mr. Malcolm. "I'm sorry. But you didn't notice anyone else lurking about, either on your way to the room or coming from it?"

Vivien Waugh thought for a moment.

"No," he said at last. "Beyond Alaris—for whom I waited until she left his room—I saw no one."

"That's a pity," said Mr. Malcolm. "I wish you had. It would make things clearer. The man I want is the man who fired that second shot."

Vivien Waugh looked at his companion. He wanted to say something, but he felt doubtful of the reception which his remark might provoke. Perhaps it seemed almost an impertinence to suggest a simple solution to a man of Mr. Malcolm's intelligence, but at last Waugh decided to risk it.

"Are you so sure, Mr. Malcolm," he said, "that the coroner's verdict was not a correct one? You know from the record . . . from the small part of it that we heard . . . that my uncle was being persecuted. Well, supposing he thought that the persecution was coming from the person who shot at him . . . I'm sure he didn't know it was me . . . supposing that turned his mind sufficiently to make him take his own life?"

"That, of course," said Mr. Malcolm, "is a perfect possibility. I must tell you another thing, young man. I was brought into this case by the inspector of police here, who is an old friend of mine and knows something of my record. I was attracted to it because he described it to me as being so strange that a man who wished to commit suicide should fire at himself and miss and then fire again successfully. You see what I mean? He thought at the time that your first shot had been an unsuccessful attempt at suicide on the part of your uncle, and it is perfectly possible that what you say is true, but . . ." He paused.

"But what?" asked Vivien Waugh.

"But there's something else," said Mr. Malcolm, "which doesn't make it quite clear, and which doesn't quite tally with the idea that your uncle committed suicide."

"What is that?" asked Vivien Waugh.

"At the moment," said Mr. Malcolm, "I prefer not to tell you, but never fear, I will explain all to you in the end. I think I am getting near a solution. I think, as the children would say, I am getting hot. I know that I want my tea. Shall we go back to the house? They will be waiting for us."

"But," said Vivien Waugh, "my letter? What are they going to say?"

"They know nothing of the contents of that letter," said Mr. Malcolm. "Let them say what they like. A question can be asked, but the answer need not be given."

CHAPTER XV

A QUARTER of an hour later two cars drew up before the great house, to which all the startling events of the last few days seemed to have lent an air of tragic expectation. There was a stern look upon the faces of both men as they clambered out of the cars and proceeded to walk the few remaining yards towards the iron-studded door. As they did so this was flung open, and Mr. Yarrow, his parchment-tinted face, seen in that dim light, giving him the aspect of a cadaverous member of some yellow race, rushed out to meet them, all trace of professional calm having completely deserted him.

"Where have you been? What's happened? Mr. Waugh, what have you been doing? What . . .?"

"For heaven's sake, Mr. Yarrow, calm yourself," said Mr. Malcolm curtly. "No hysterics, I implore you."

A dull flush crept slowly up the little solicitor's face: actually he bit his lips as though resisting an urgent temptation to fling back some retort, and without another word he turned upon his heel and walked back towards the sitting room, where, gathered in the doorway, Mr. Malcolm could see the Colonel and his wife, their eyes wide with curiosity and their lips obviously twitching to put the questions which only courtesy prevented them from asking.

"Come along, Waugh."

Without more ado Mr. Malcolm strolled casually into the sitting room and smiled around mischievously at the eager faces before him. Vivien Waugh, with a like nonchalance, followed close at his heels and sank down in an easy chair with a calm effrontery which did not fail in effect. The taut anxiety on the three watching faces was slowly replaced by a mixture of relief and irritation. It was plain to both new arrivals that their unexciting return had provided a dull anticlimax to the horrors which these people had keyed themselves to expect. Suspense, when proved to be uncalled for, is apt to provoke annoyance with the origin of its inception, and it was with no friendly glance that the Colonel looked at Waugh.

"Perhaps you will be kind enough to explain what all this is about, young man?" he said angrily. "You go off leaving a letter . . . Mr. Malcolm reads it, then rushes off after you in my car . . . without a word of explanation . . . it's . . . it's . . ."

"Abominable?" suggested Mr. Malcolm blandly. "I quite agree. But then . . . explanations take up so much time, don't they? And besides . . . that was a private letter, Colonel Browne. You can hardly expect me to break confidence with regard to my correspondence."

Mr. Malcolm smiled, but there was no answering gleam upon the Colonel's agitated features.

"Let me tell you, sir," he broke out indignantly, "that that was a private car, and . . ."

"Really, Colonel Browne, I'm terribly sorry. I'm afraid it was all my fault," broke in Vivien Waugh quickly. "I'll explain everything—if Mr. Malcolm doesn't object."

Vivien Waugh cast a quizzical glance at Mr. Malcolm, a glance which the other was not slow to interpret. His mouth twisted slightly into a sly smile, and he shrugged his shoulders casually.

"Just as you like, Waugh," he said. "It's your story . . . tell just what you like."

"You bet I will," murmured Waugh beneath his breath; and then aloud, turning to the eager faces around him, he said slowly: "You see, it was like this. There's a friend of mine living a few miles away . . . who was also a great friend of Peter Browne . . . and I thought that if I could get hold of him he might be of some use to us."

Vivien Waugh stopped and looked around at his audience smilingly.

"Of use to us?" gasped Mr. Yarrow angrily. "Of use to us? What on earth d'you mean?"

"Well, you see . . ."

But to Vivien Waugh's disappointment his fertile brain was not called upon to supply any more explanatory details. For as he spoke the door of the room was thrust open and Alaris and Norman rushed in. Their clothes were soaking and clung limply to them, and water oozed from their shoes onto the polished floor, but it was not this which caused those within that room to catch their breath and look at them in a sudden fear. On the faces of Alaris and Paul was that numbed, hopeless look which one associates only with the greatest final calamity which can befall any human being. They stood there with cheeks white and haggard, and in their eyes that stricken look which commands an instant silence, and for a long moment no one spoke.

But suddenly Alaris gave a gasp and then began to laugh hysterically. She had just caught sight of Mr. Malcolm, who was standing slightly in the shadow. On the instant Paul Norman turned in that direction also: his face became even more white and strained: he took one step forward, gave a choking cry, tottered, and would have fallen had not Mr. Malcolm sprung forward and gripped him by the arm.

"It's all right, Norman," he muttered. "It's really me; not a word now . . . look after Alaris."

But Alaris was, for the moment, past any aid. Her laughter had ended in a sudden moan, and Vivien Waugh was just in time to catch her as she fell.

"Put her in that chair," said Mr. Malcolm quickly. "She'll be all right in a moment. Get me some water, Norman . . . oh, there's some over there. Right! Now I want everybody to go away, please . . . all except Norman. I can't let you go yet, though . . . leave the house, I mean . . . the record has not been replaced."

"But . . . Alaris . . . we can't . . ."

The Colonel and Mr. Yarrow broke into instant expostulation, but Mr. Malcolm cut them short.

"You will please leave this room at once." His tones were icy, and into them had crept that hint of authority which never failed in its effect. "I wish to be alone with Alaris and Norman."

Turning his back upon the others, he walked across to the unconscious girl, over whom Paul Norman was now anxiously bending, endeavouring to force some water between her lips. His hand was trembling to such an extent that he could not achieve his purpose, and without a word Mr. Malcolm took the glass from him and set to work himself. In a few minutes his efforts were successful. A slight flush crept into the girl's white cheeks, her eyelashes quivered, then opened, and for a moment her eyes met those of Mr. Malcolm without the slightest flicker of recognition. For a moment only, however, and then recognition came and with it remembrance.

Again Alaris began to laugh.

"Stop that!" said Mr. Malcolm quickly.

But the girl could not. Tears, tears of sorrow and of laughter, coursed down her cheeks, and staring at Mr. Malcolm she laughed . . . laughed until the sound of this unnatural mirth filled both men with an ugly fear, fraying their already strained nerves almost to breaking point.

"Stop that!" commanded Mr. Malcolm imperiously. "*Stop it!* d'you hear?"

He poured some neat whisky from the decanter on a tray which had been placed in the room and forced the girl to drink it. The strong spirit took her breath away, and in a little while she had recovered sufficiently to be able to talk in a strained whisper.

"How . . . how did you get here?" she asked.

"I walked here," said Mr. Malcolm blandly.

"But," said Alaris, "but . . . the Martello tower!"

"Oh, *that!*" said Mr. Malcolm.

"How did you get out?"

"Why," said Mr. Malcolm, "I was let out. By a friend," he added.

"Who let you out?" asked Paul Norman sharply.

Mr. Malcolm looked at him for a moment before answering, but then his voice betrayed no emotion whatsoever.

"I was let out," he said, "by Kate Browne."

"By Kate Browne?"

This extraordinary and totally unexpected reply filled Alaris with an astonishment which drove all else from her mind. Nothing could have been of more assistance towards dispelling the hysteria which the sight of Mr. Malcolm, alive and apparently unhurt, Mr. Malcolm whom she had believed to be lying drowned within the cellar of that partially submerged Martello tower, had not unnaturally provoked. All was forgotten in this new development.

"But . . . but how did she know you were there?"

"Oh, that was simple," said Mr. Malcolm. "You see, she was sheltering from the storm in the little copse of trees which is in full view of the Martello tower, and she saw two people go in."

"And only one come out, I suppose," said Paul Norman hoarsely. "Well, thank God for Kate Browne then!"

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Malcolm. "I'm surprised that you should say that. I thought that you wished me dead."

"Wished you were dead!"

The words came almost as a cry. Paul Norman had suffered too much within the last few hours to be able to recover himself at once. He was still shaking, his mouth twitching visibly as he spoke, and, try as he might, he could not render his voice quite steady.

"I . . . I never meant that . . . I swear . . . I only meant . . ."

"He wanted to keep you a prisoner . . . out of the way while I escaped," interrupted Alaris quickly. "He did it for me, Mr. Malcolm. It's me you've got to blame."

"I'm not blaming anybody yet," said Mr. Malcolm gently. "But I would like to know a little more about the why and wherefore. Tell me . . . why did our young friend try to do me bodily harm?"

"Because . . . well, because Paul had found out . . . guessed, I think, that . . . that I had something to do with my guardian's death."

Alaris spoke the words bravely. The colour had returned to her face now, and although it was still strained and unhappy, she looked more calm and almost relieved. The moment had come for confession, and, as so often happens, the thought of at last daring the worst, turning her fears of discovery into a tangible thing, lightened her heart in a quite inexplicable way. Her eyes met those of Mr. Malcolm frankly: she had no more to hide now: there was no further reason for concealment.

"Alaris, my dear, why didn't you . . . take the opportunity? Why didn't you escape?"

Mr. Malcolm spoke the words softly: he was looking at Alaris with a curious expression on his face, an expression which she could not fathom. It was half frightened, half regretful. For Mr. Malcolm knew that now he was to be made aware of the part that Alaris had played in this tragic mystery: a part about which he had long had suspicions, suspicions against which he had fought without success. He found himself wishing now that she had indeed accepted the opportunity which Paul Norman, in his anxiety, had provided: that she had slipped away, leaving him ignorant of her exact participation, ignorant and thus absolved from any urgent need to bring her back.

"Because I didn't want to," said Alaris slowly. "Because . . . oh, well, I'm not that sort of coward, I suppose. And . . . but hadn't I better tell you everything?"

"Alaris," said Mr. Malcolm very seriously, "I think that it's about time you told me all about it. So many people . . . all of you, in fact . . . have tried to conceal things, and it's only fair for me to warn you that these things are coming to light. It's only fair also for me to tell you that I know far more about your guardian's death than any of you give me credit for, so I think that . . . if you told me everything . . . perhaps it would be best."

Mr. Malcolm spoke almost reluctantly. He thrust one hand into his pocket and withdrew a cigarette case with which Vivien Waugh had provided him; his own was still lying at the clubhouse, where he had left it that morning before starting out on his eventful round of golf. He handed it to Alaris.

"Thanks."

She took one, waited until Mr. Malcolm had produced a lighted match, and then, having smoked for a second or two, she spoke abruptly:

"I want to tell you . . . I want to get this frightful business off my mind . . . out of my hands. I'll tell you all, and then it's your responsibility . . . not mine."

"A responsibility," said Mr. Malcolm, "which has been mine all the time, and which has not rested lightly on my shoulders, nor does it rest lightly on my shoulders now."

"How do you think my guardian died?"

Mr. Malcolm hesitated for a moment before replying. The question was rather unexpected.

"Why," he said, "I think we all know that. He was shot."

There was a moment of silence, and then Alaris spoke curtly, her voice monotonous and almost indifferent.

"He was shot . . . yes . . . but he was also poisoned. You see . . . *I* poisoned him."

"Ah!"

The exclamation was almost a cry of pain. Paul Norman was looking at the girl with a despairing wretchedness which smote Alaris out of her forced calm.

"But not purposely, Paul, not purposely, darling! I swear it!"

"Of course not," said Mr. Malcolm gently. "Don't be silly, Paul. Don't interrupt any more, either. You're not helping her, and what she has to say cannot be easy."

He turned again to the girl.

"Take your time, my dear, but tell me everything now. It's so much simpler to get it all off your chest . . . and so much better."

Alaris cast one more glance towards Paul Norman, who had buried his head in his hands as though unable to bear the suspense any longer; then, turning to Mr. Malcolm, she spoke rapidly.

"You know, my guardian was a very erratic man . . . terribly frightened of things . . . frightened of death. He'd got this obsession that someone was trying to kill him. Well . . . because of that he changed all the labels on his medicine bottles, changed them all around, so that the poisons were labelled harmless drugs and the drugs poisons."

"I see," said Mr. Malcolm—"I see. But wasn't that—er—very dangerous? Of course you had to know because you used to give him his medicines, didn't you?"

"Yes, I knew," said Alaris miserably, "and I was the only person who did. Every night I used to give him a sleeping draught . . . the night of the storm he was very excited . . . very feverish . . . and he wouldn't let me put the light on . . . he wanted to be in the dark, and so . . . when I gave him the medicine I poured it out . . ."

"Of the wrong bottle by mistake?"

It was Paul Norman who had spoken. He was looking at Alaris now, looking at her eagerly, and the haggardness had vanished from his face.

"Yes . . . I took the wrong bottle, but I swear, Mr. Malcolm, I swear it was by mistake. Only, you see, I've got no proof."

"Don't talk about proof now," said Mr. Malcolm. There was a trace of irritation in his voice. "Why all you people should think that I suspect you of the worst possible motives is a thing which I don't quite understand." He paused a moment and then spoke again, this time more gently. "But, Alaris, how do you know that you did this?"

"Because the next morning . . . that awful morning . . . I noticed the medicine glass. There was some liquid left in it, and it was black. The sleeping draught was red. I rushed to the medicine cupboard and found I had used the wrong bottle . . . you see, I knew exactly where I had put it."

"And I suppose you destroyed the bottles at once—before anyone had noticed them?"

"No, I couldn't. You see, the doctor was actually in the room when I discovered it," said Alaris miserably.

"Did you tell him to say nothing about this?"

"No, I swear I didn't: that's what puzzled me. I was waiting for him to speak about it all the time, but he kept silent."

Mr. Malcolm frowned. There was something in all this which he did not understand, something which complicated matters enormously, complicated them just as apparently they were becoming more simple. In one way the girl's confession had relieved his mind considerably. That she had had some part in the death of Peter Browne, Mr. Malcolm had always feared, but that such a part should be so wholly innocent, so entirely devoid of any guilty intention, dissolved all his doubts and lightened his heart immeasurably. But for what reason had the doctor refrained from making any mention at the inquest that the dead man had been poisoned? Had he died of that poison? Or had he been shot before the drug had had time to become effective? If the latter, then Alaris was safe—safe if it could be proved beyond dispute that she most certainly had not fired the shot that killed. And that this could be proved Mr. Malcolm was now quite confident. Only . . . why had the doctor kept silence? Why had such a vital fact been so strangely ignored? What was the man's reason for such unprofessional conduct?

"But you . . . you *do* believe I didn't do it purposely?"

Alaris spoke anxiously: there was a suggestion of tears in her voice, a hint that the calmness with which she had steeled herself to make that confession was now breaking down. Mr. Malcolm was quick to reassure her.

"Alaris, my dear, of course I believe you . . . you've got nothing to worry about . . . nothing at all. I don't suppose, in any case, that Peter Browne did die of the poison. He was shot, you know, and I expect he was shot long before the poison could have taken effect."

Alaris looked up at Mr. Malcolm quickly.

"If only I could be sure of that . . . sure that he didn't die of poisoning . . . that he was alive when he was shot . . . I . . . oh, I don't know what I would do! Perhaps I might even sleep again at night," she added wistfully.

"I propose," said Mr. Malcolm, "to find out all about it, Alaris. Don't worry any more. Get this young man to give you some tea . . . and no more worry. But . . . not a word to anybody, mind."

Mr. Malcolm patted Alaris gently on the back and then turned to Paul Norman.

"Young man," he said gravely, "I suppose you know that by now the Martello tower is under water . . . that but for Kate Browne I'd have already been for my last swim?"

The youth shuddered visibly.

"I know that now," he said earnestly, "but honestly, Mr. Malcolm, I had no idea of it . . . no intention, I swear. It was only to keep you out of the way for a while . . . to make you a prisoner until . . ."

"Until Alaris could get away: an opportunity which she, however, refused to use," broke in Mr. Malcolm curtly. "It's a great mistake, Norman, to worry too much about anyone . . . that sort of thing always tends to make life considerably more complicated and a thousand times more dangerous. To help is all right, but to interfere . . . to interfere is the work of a brave fool. Still," he smiled, a pleasant, a disarming smile, which did much to remove the bite of his words, "perhaps where Alaris is concerned a lot is forgivable. To you as well I say . . . not a word to a soul."

A second later the door slammed behind him and Alaris and Norman were alone. For a long moment they were silent, looking at each other, and then Paul Norman took her in his arms.

CHAPTER XVI

Mr. Malcolm walked down the road towards the village, and there could be no doubt that he was definitely on business. He walked rapidly and looked neither to right, nor to left, except for an occasional rather wistful glance towards the golf course whenever the road passed sufficiently near for him to see a portion of the fairway or a bit of green. Mr. Malcolm was no shirker when it came to work, but the round of golf which he had played with Paul Norman had scarcely been a relaxation, and he was longing to be able to spare the time in his thoughts to consider fully why he was so totally unable to pick up a ball cleanly on the fairway with his brassie whereas he could do it without great difficulty with his very slightly more laid back spoon.

Arrived in the village, he passed the police station resolutely, without even so much as a glance inside. But as he passed the door Mr. Malcolm could not withhold a smile to himself, for he wondered whether the inspector happened at that moment to be looking out of the window, happened, perhaps, to have seen him pass: he wondered whether the inspector was in doubt as to the effect of that short conversation which they had had together in the golf club such a very little while ago. Yet even as this question came to his mind, Mr. Malcolm dismissed it. He knew very well why the shrewd inspector had interested him, had, in fact, suggested the possibility of crime to him, though by no one else had it been suspected. Had the inspector come straight to Mr. Malcolm and told him that there was a case for him, he might very easily have failed to enlist his aid; but although he had been somewhat devious in the manner of his approach, his method, suggestive of mystery, had proved entirely efficacious. Mr. Malcolm smiled again to himself: the inspector knew very well how to deal with Mr. Malcolm.

Only a few houses farther on Mr. Malcolm came to a small gate on which was a brass plate. The name of the local doctor was engraved on this plate, and Mr. Malcolm pushed open the gate and advanced up the small garden path to the front door. He rang the bell and had not long to wait. A servant girl opened the door and informed him that the doctor was at home. He was shown into the consulting room and his name was taken. Mr. Malcolm flung himself down upon a chintz-covered chair which gave a totally false suggestion of comfort, and stared around at the dreary little room in which he found himself. A green baize-covered table supporting several dog-eared copies of long extinct magazines filled the centre of the room, faded chintz curtains flapped dismally before the windows, while on the floor only one rug, displaying a medley of violently clashing colours, brightened the cold brown surface of the drab linoleum. Mr. Malcolm shivered slightly. The room was more than a little depressing.

He rose to his feet as the little doctor came in. To Mr. Malcolm he looked even more precise and fussy than ever: his eyes, darting swift, cunning glances at his visitor from beneath enormous bushy eyebrows, gave him much the same appearance as that of a perky little bird. But suddenly it occurred to Mr. Malcolm that all the doctor's normal mannerisms were being exaggerated on this occasion, and his quick perception realized that the man was nervous, terribly nervous. He did not think that the doctor knew about his own connection with the case of Peter Browne's strange death, but there was something which was worrying this man, something about which he was afraid the other might be aware—or so it appeared to Mr. Malcolm. And in that moment he began to take a new interest in the little doctor, a greater interest even than he had felt for him when first he had entered that house. When he spoke, however, Mr. Malcolm was very friendly.

"I have one or two questions to ask you, Doctor," he said, "in relation to the death of Peter Browne."

Mr. Malcolm was watching him very closely, but if the other had anything to conceal, the mention of the name which would seem the most likely to disconcert him failed entirely to provoke any sudden start or symptom of distress, and, when he answered, the doctor's voice was steady.

"Oh, yes?"

"It's only fair to put all my cards on the table at once," said Mr. Malcolm quietly. "I'm interested in this case professionally."

"Professionally?" asked the doctor.

Mr. Malcolm smiled.

"You know very well what I mean," he said. "You and the inspector here are about the only two people in this village who know why I make my sudden disappearances and what I do when I am gone."

"You've got something to do with the police?" asked the doctor.

He asked the question innocently enough, almost too innocently, thought Mr. Malcolm.

"Considering," he said, "that I have helped you once or twice when you've been mixed up in cases with the inspector, you ought to know that very well."

"Well, I've noticed you hovering about," said the doctor.

Mr. Malcolm laughed. The description struck him as being very apt, very suitable. He rather liked the idea of himself hovering about on the outskirts of a crime, ready to pounce upon an undiscovered portion of the case should the police fail to do so. But he did not explain his amusement. Instead he continued quickly:

"I want you to tell me all about it," he said.

"What can I tell you?" said the doctor, "except what came out at the inquest? Is that what you want to know?"

"No," said Mr. Malcolm, "I want to know a lot more."

"A lot more?" The doctor appeared surprised. "But, my dear Malcolm, I can't tell you any more. I don't know any more."

"Oh," said Mr. Malcolm, "I think you do."

It was a challenge, the first direct challenge of the conversation. The doctor paused: a slight flush came to his cheeks, a flush which might have been of anger and irritation or, perhaps, of discomfort. Mr. Malcolm noted it without remark.

"You were called in," said Mr. Malcolm firmly. "When?"

"I was called in to see the body the morning after . . . after . . ."

"After what?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"After he shot himself," said the doctor.

"Oh, no," said Mr. Malcolm.

There was a pause, a very awkward pause, which, as Mr. Malcolm seemed in no hurry to break it, upset the little doctor considerably. He fidgeted about in the chair in which he had seated himself, and once again that telltale flush came to his cheeks. At last, since he could stand the suspense no longer, he broke the silence at almost the precise moment that Mr. Malcolm had felt convinced he would.

"But I was," he said. "I tell you I was. What are you getting at, Malcolm?"

"You were called in," said Mr. Malcolm quietly, "to view the body on the morning after Peter Browne was murdered."

"*Murdered?*"

The doctor almost started out of his chair in his consternation. Mr. Malcolm looked at him closely before replying. The little man was evidently very much distressed, or else he was one of the most consummately skilful actors ever lost to the stage. Mr. Malcolm watched him thoughtfully, wondering which was the truth, but he soon came to his own conclusion.

"There's no doubt at all, Doctor," he said—"at least, not in my own mind—that the verdict of the Coroner's Inquest was erroneous."

Even as he spoke the doctor seemed to recover his self-control, and he sat back once more in his chair.

"Even a vague connection with the police," he said, "seems to have infected you, Malcolm, with their suspicious natures. I'd no idea that the thing was so contagious." He paused a moment, and then continued quickly: "Aren't you entirely forgetting that Peter Browne was mad?"

Mr. Malcolm smiled, a somewhat cynical smile.

"So you say, Doctor," he murmured lightly, "so you say. But as far as I can make out you've never been able to suggest one episode to prove his madness."

The other leant forward earnestly.

"Peter Browne was mad," he said. "Mr. Malcolm, Peter Browne was quite definitely mad. The last time I saw him he pointed to a scrap of burnt paper in the grate and informed me that it was the remains of an anonymous letter he had just received, a letter threatening to take his life. He also told me that he was in the habit of receiving such letters, but when I asked him to show one to me he had to confess that he couldn't . . . he got out of it by saying that he'd destroyed them all just as soon as he received them. Hardly feasible, Mr. Malcolm, hardly feasible! No . . . Peter Browne was definitely slave to a grave obsession."

"I wonder!"

Mr. Malcolm was watching the doctor through half-closed eyes: here was information he had certainly not expected. For a moment he was silent, and then, very firmly, very quietly, he continued:

"And supposing, Doctor, supposing Peter Browne had told you the truth? Supposing he *was* being threatened?"

The other gave a short, an almost indignant laugh.

"Supposing your grandmother!" he said. "The thing's preposterous, Mr. Malcolm, quite preposterous! Remember . . . we're living in the twentieth century!"

"Exactly!" muttered Mr. Malcolm with a fleeting smile, but the doctor brushed the word aside with complete disdain.

"Let me tell you something, Mr. Malcolm," he said slowly. "Immediately after the Coroner's Inquest was over, the inspector and I retired to the small room which is just beside the court, and there he did his best to convince me that the verdict which had just been brought in was a mistaken one. As that verdict was very largely brought about by the evidence which I gave as the medical man in attendance upon the deceased, I was at first inclined to be annoyed, and I took a great deal of trouble to explain to him exactly how and why I thought that the verdict was not only just but correct."

"Yes," said Mr. Malcolm, "he told me all about it."

"Very well, then," said the doctor, "what I said to him it is not necessary for me to repeat to you now. Everything that I said then I hold to now."

Mr. Malcolm leant forward.

"Listen, Doctor," he said. "I don't ask you to take anything back publicly. In fact, all that you said then may be perfectly true, for . . . well, shall we say for a hypothetical case? But I am talking about the case of Peter Browne, and I want much more information than you gave to the inspector . . . not necessarily for his ears. Am I making myself clear?"

"You are making yourself abominably clear," said the little doctor irritably. "You're telling me that you believe me either to be a murderer or an accessory to the fact of murder. I tell you I'm neither."

"This won't do," said Mr. Malcolm. "You're telling me a lot, but not the things I want to know. Let me make myself a little more clear."

"I wish you would," broke in the doctor.

"All right," said Mr. Malcolm. "I will. I'll make myself very clear. . . . I'll make myself so clear that there can be no possible question of misunderstanding. But I want to ask you one or two small questions first."

He paused, again watching the effect of his words upon the doctor, noting the many signs of nervousness, even of apprehension.

"When a man is poisoned, Doctor," said Mr. Malcolm quietly but very firmly, "is it immediately obvious to a medical man who is called in?"

The change in the little man which came about as he heard Mr. Malcolm pronounce the word "poisoned" was so remarkable that even the speaker himself, accustomed as he was to witness startling results from unexpected words and actions on his part, was greatly astounded. All the natural colour of the doctor seemed to have left him. His jaw dropped, literally dropped, and his eyes became distended with surprise and fear to such an extent that Mr. Malcolm was in some doubt as to whether he was not about to suffer some kind of fit. But by a superhuman effort, the stages of which were visible as he watched, the doctor slowly regained control of himself sufficiently to reply. Yet his voice, even to his own ears, must have sounded entirely foreign and unnatural: all he was able to do was to pronounce the words and string them together correctly.

"It is not always obvious."

"More often than not?" asked Mr. Malcolm pitilessly.

"No, I wouldn't even go as far as to say that. It depends entirely on the poison used."

"I see," said Mr. Malcolm. "I have no need to ask you, of course, if a man can obtain poison without a doctor's prescription?"

"Certain kinds only," said the doctor, "and then he must sign the poison book."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Malcolm quickly. "But the poison which was readily available either to the hand of the late Mr. Browne or to that of his murderer was in the form of a medicine."

"I don't quite follow," said the doctor.

"Yes, you do," said Mr. Malcolm. "It was in the form of a medicine which you yourself prescribed for Mr. Browne, and an overdose of which, I think I am right in saying, would have killed him."

Once again there was a pause. But now the little doctor had recovered himself and seemed resigned to whatever fate Mr. Malcolm had in store for him. He spoke listlessly: he spoke as if his interest in the apparent fence which he had set up when first Mr. Malcolm had entered the room that afternoon had gone: he spoke as if he were a fatalist, ready to accept whatever might befall.

"Yes," he said, "you are quite right, Malcolm. I did prescribe for him one mixture which contained enough poison to kill him if taken in a large overdose."

"Did you have a look at that medicine cupboard at the same time as you looked at the dead man?"

"It so happens," said the doctor, "that I did, although there was no reason for me to do so. Don't forget—he had been shot through the head."

"By the second of two shots?" said Mr. Malcolm quickly.

"That I did not know at the time," said the doctor. "I was told afterwards by the inspector."

"Before the inquest?"

"Yes, before the inquest. But I built up my theory, which I put to the Coroner's Jury and which they accepted, on the principle of his general state of health before the fatal night. If he died by his own hand—which I see no reason to doubt—he must have fired the shot which did not hit him first."

"Quite true," said Mr. Malcolm. "But you said a moment ago something which rather interested me. You said that if he died from his own hand . . . which you had no reason to doubt."

"I did have no reason to doubt it," maintained the doctor stoutly.

"Not even after you'd examined the medicine cupboard?" asked Mr. Malcolm quietly.

The doctor hesitated: then he gave in.

"After I'd examined the medicine cupboard," he admitted with a sigh, "I did have every reason to doubt it."

"And that was on the very morning that you were called in? Long before the inquest?"

"It was," said the doctor.

"What did you discover to give you reason to doubt it?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"I discovered," said the doctor, "that the sleeping draught which I had given him in order to enable him to obtain some rest at night was labelled *POISON*, was labelled, in fact, with the label which should have been on another bottle . . . that containing the medicine which I had prescribed for him."

"And what was on that bottle?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"On that bottle," said the doctor, "was the label of the sleeping draught."

"Rather a curious discovery, wasn't it?" said Mr. Malcolm.

"It upset me very much," said the doctor.

"Why?"

"Because . . ." The doctor hesitated a moment. There was a trapped look in his eyes, the look that might be seen in those of an animal at last driven to bay. "Oh, because it was *I* who supplied the bottles."

He suddenly jumped up from the chair in which he was seated, and walked with stumbling steps and bent head to the window, where he leant, as though for support, against the woodwork. Mr. Malcolm watched his movements curiously: there was still a great deal about which he was uncertain, and although he knew that a few words on his own part might immeasurably relieve the great anxiety from which the other was suffering, yet he felt that the time for saying those words had not quite come. He waited a moment or two to see whether the doctor had anything more to add, but then, seeing that this appeared unlikely, Mr. Malcolm murmured:

"You mean . . . you think you made a mistake?"

For answer the doctor turned slightly and nodded his head miserably. For a second Mr. Malcolm felt a slight twinge of compunction—the other's despair was so painfully obvious: but this was no time in which to be swayed by pity, and hardening his heart once more, Mr. Malcolm continued firmly:

"Did you supply Peter Browne with both the bottles—the poison and the drug—both at the same time? Could such a mistake have been at all possible?"

There was a moment's silence, and then, in a voice strained and so low that Mr. Malcolm could hardly catch the words, the doctor muttered brokenly:

"I . . . I don't know . . . I can't remember . . . I think I gave him the poison a long time before . . . but . . . but . . . *I can't be sure.*"

The last words were almost a gasp, and Mr. Malcolm caught his breath sharply. So that was it . . . he could not be sure. But why? Why was it that a little village practitioner, whose list of patients could surely not number many, should be so entirely hazy in his mind as to the approximate time when he had provided one of his chief invalids with a deadly poison?

"But surely you keep some sort of record," said

Mr. Malcolm curtly, "a record of the medicines which you give . . . of the patients you see?"

"Yes. . . ." The doctor's voice was quite unchanged, still low and very strained. "Yes, I do keep a book."

"Well . . . doesn't it tell you then whether you gave him the two bottles together?"

Again there was silence, and then the doctor spoke slowly, jerkily, almost as if the words were being forced from him against his knowledge, forced from him by the superior will power of the man before him:

"Yes . . . I . . . I gave him the poison . . . some weeks . . . before the drug."

"Ah!"

Mr. Malcolm sat back. So his instinct had been right. There *was* something behind all this: there was a certain fact which the little doctor had not yet divulged. Mr. Malcolm's eyes narrowed dangerously, while his whole demeanour stiffened. He was like a hound on the scent, filled with a grim alertness.

"So you think," he said slowly but very firmly, "you think, then, Doctor, that you placed the wrong labels on each of the two bottles with which you supplied Peter Browne at different times?"

The doctor nodded miserably.

"And that," said Mr. Malcolm quietly, "is the reason why you have withheld all this information from the police?"

"Yes."

The monosyllable was curt and immediate, but the little doctor's head was bowed.

Mr. Malcolm's eyes flashed angrily.

"That was not the reason you failed to inform the police," he said sharply; "you had something else to hide. For heaven's sake be frank with me, Doctor. This is too grave a matter for anything but the truth—the *complete* truth. Do you really seriously suggest that a man of your standing in this village would keep back important information like that simply because you feared it might be suspected that you had affixed wrong labels? It's . . . it's ridiculous, Doctor, and moreover . . . it isn't true!"

Throughout this tirade the doctor's head had sunk gradually lower and lower: he was trembling now, trembling in every limb, and again Mr. Malcolm felt that momentary twinge of slight compunction. He had gone too far now, however, to draw back, and with a perfectly unmoved face he awaited the other's reply. It came at last, but in a very different fashion from the way in which he had expected it. For, suddenly, a sob broke from the little man's throat, a hard dry sob, as though the pent-up emotions of many miserable hours were at last finding an outlet. Then, looking up at his companion, meeting his eyes squarely for the first time throughout their interview, he spoke, and his voice was no longer hesitating, though still very low and strained:

"No," he said slowly, "no, it isn't true. But it's true enough that I wasn't sure, and I'll tell you why

. . . I'll tell you why, Mr. Malcolm. You see . . . I . . ." For a second his voice faltered, but for a second only, and then he continued firmly: "I drink."

He stopped, and for a long while there was silence. Mr. Malcolm sat perfectly still in his chair, his face entirely devoid of any expression, but through his mind thoughts, tumultuous thoughts, raced triumphantly. So that was it! He had succeeded . . . he had got his man to talk, had discovered at last what it was that lay behind this strange, this almost criminal, reticence on the part of a professional man. For a few moments the realization of his success blinded Mr. Malcolm to all other considerations: but then humanity intervened. For a little longer yet would he allow his victim to remain in ignorance of the true facts—just long enough to enable him to learn everything, to glean while he could every detail that the doctor had still to tell.

At last he took a long breath and was about to speak, but a rush of words from the other stopped him. The doctor was talking, talking rapidly, in that low-pitched, husky whisper which not one of his patients would have recognized as the voice of their officious, precise little practitioner.

"I drink," he repeated. "I've done so for years . . . I can't help myself . . . I've tried . . . *God!* how I've tried to stop it . . . sometimes for as long as six months I've managed not to touch a drop . . . but it's difficult . . . terribly difficult. . . . I've managed not to let a soul know . . . suspect . . . it hasn't interfered, affected my work in any way . . . at least"—his voice became even more strained—"not until now . . . and even now I might not have done it . . . I don't remember . . . I can't believe that I *did* do it . . . but . . . but the tragedy of it is . . . I can't be sure."

There was a pause, a long pause, and then Mr. Malcolm spoke quietly:

"So *that* was the reason why you were silent at the inquest? You were afraid that all this might come out?"

"Yes." The doctor nodded miserably. "Yes. . . . that was the reason."

Mr. Malcolm got up. He moved over to the window before which the doctor was still standing.

"Well, it's a great pity, Doctor," he said slowly, "a great pity that you didn't chance it. You'd have saved yourself a lot of misery if you had. You see . . . you *didn't* make a mistake about those labels."

"What?"

The other had taken a step forward: all trace of colour had fled from his face. He was standing, staring at Mr. Malcolm with just such a look as the latter had seen before that day on the face of Alaris . . . the look of a person condemned to death to whom release has miraculously arrived.

"It's quite true, Doctor," Mr. Malcolm continued calmly. "You made no mistake about those labels. They had been altered some months before his death by Peter Browne himself. All the bottles in the medicine cupboard were labelled wrongly. . . . Ah, I see you knew that . . . well, it was Peter Browne himself who had done it . . . he was obsessed with the idea that someone was endeavouring to kill him."

The doctor took a long breath, and then he spoke quickly, jerkily:

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Because Alaris told me," replied Mr. Malcolm calmly. "Only a few minutes ago, in fact. That's why I came along . . . to find out why you had been so extraordinarily reticent about that poison."

"I see."

There was a long pause. The doctor took out a handkerchief and wiped his face, and although it was obvious to Mr. Malcolm that he was trying all he could to retain his self-control, the hands that held that handkerchief were trembling violently. Suddenly he lifted his head with a jerk and glanced swiftly at a cupboard in the wall. With a swift movement he approached it, unlatched the door, and removed a bottle and a glass that were inside. In a second he had poured some of the liquid into the glass and transferred this to his mouth. Then, before the astonished Mr. Malcolm could guess at his purpose, he lifted the bottle and threw it passionately across the room against the stone fireplace, where it crashed to pieces within the grate, the liquid oozing out in a gradually increasing pool upon the floor.

"And that's the last drop I'll ever touch, Mr. Malcolm," he said brokenly. "I swear it . . . the last drop

I'll ever touch. I've gone through hell this last week . . . hell . . . no one could have the slightest idea of how much I've suffered . . . thank God . . . oh, thank God!"

Mr. Malcolm watched him dryly. There was a cynical curl to his mouth, an entire lack of enthusiasm in his eyes, but when he spoke there was no trace in his voice, no smallest suggestion even, of any skepticism.

"Doctor," he said calmly, "you've had a lucky escape . . . you're not by any means the only one in this business who's had a lucky escape . . . and I only hope you'll remember it next time you feel . . ."

He stopped and motioned towards the golden liquid upon the floor.

"And . . . and you?" said the doctor slowly. He was watching Mr. Malcolm intently, and there was more than a hint of fear in his regard. "And you, Mr. Malcolm. What are you going to do?"

"To do?" Mr. Malcolm sounded surprised.

"Yes . . . about me, I mean? Are you . . . are you going to make this public . . . that . . . that I . . ."

Mr. Malcolm laughed.

"For heaven's sake, Doctor," he said, "why on earth should I? I'm not a society news paragraph monger. I can't arrest you merely because you drink . . . only I hope you'll arrest yourself next time you feel you want to."

Mr. Malcolm laughed again: he liked his joke.

"You can take my word for it, Mr. Malcolm," said the little doctor slowly. "I promise you that . . . not another drop . . . I can never thank you enough . . . you're a sportsman . . . you're . . ."

But Mr. Malcolm broke in upon him curtly. In his voice was a brisk, businesslike note, and the doctor was quick to respond to it.

"I must be going now, Doctor, as I've a lot to do. But before I leave you I want to know definitely whether Peter Browne died from poisoning or if he was killed by the shot in his head. Was he alive when he was shot?"

"He was." The reply was instantaneous. "He most certainly was, Mr. Malcolm. That poison would have needed at least an hour in which to take effect . . . it was very slow, but . . . but it would have been sure."

"So the man who shot Peter Browne could not possibly escape justice by the suggestion that his victim was dead when he was shot? Please think carefully before you answer, Doctor. This is a very important point."

"Yes." The doctor nodded his head gravely. "Yes, I quite appreciate that, Mr. Malcolm. But I can only say what I said before . . . there can be no possible loophole for anyone who murdered Peter Browne. He most certainly was not dead when he was shot. And, in my own defense, Mr. Malcolm, I must tell you that that was a strong factor in salving my conscience as to keeping silent about the poison. I knew it was irrelevant to the case . . . that it really did not affect it, and . . ."

"Rubbish!" said Mr. Malcolm contemptuously, walking to the door. "Rubbish!" he repeated curtly. "You know perfectly well your reason for keeping silent—and so do I. It was your duty to keep back nothing. . . . Irrelevant indeed!" Mr. Malcolm laughed dryly, then he held out his hand to the crestfallen doctor. "Well, good-bye," he said, "and thank you for being so frank with me, Doctor. But remember . . . there must be no other case." And with a meaning look he motioned towards the fireplace.

A second or two later Mr. Malcolm had passed through the door, along the little garden path again, and out into the road. But before striking back once more towards the great house upon the golf links, he cast one last glance into the doctor's consulting room. The curtains had not yet been drawn, and Mr. Malcolm could see the little man seated beside the table, his head buried within his arms, his shoulders shaken as though with sobs. For a second Mr. Malcolm paused, and a curiously sympathetic look dispelled the cynical smile that had lingered on his lips.

"Poor devil!" he muttered curtly. And then, with lengthy strides, a triumphant light shining in his eyes, he walked briskly upon his way. One more milestone had been passed, one more difficulty brushed aside.

CHAPTER XVII

Mr. Malcolm returned to the house briskly. There was something now about his whole attitude, since this interview with the rather pathetic little doctor, which seemed to imply that each added difficulty which came to him in the case only whetted his appetite all the more for the final solution. The more brisk did Mr. Malcolm appear, the more certain became his intimate friends that danger was ahead for somebody.

Mr. Malcolm was not idle during that quick walk back to the house which had been the scene of crime. He reflected on the power which one evil man can wield even after death, a power to influence perfectly innocent people into stupid, even criminal, actions. He reflected on the impression which the late Peter Browne had made upon him on the few occasions when they had met. Mr. Malcolm was about the only man in that small village whom Peter Browne had asked to dinner, and this was very largely due to the fact that the murdered man, although unfriendly by nature and unattractive to others perhaps for this very fact, had appreciated Mr. Malcolm's conversation. Mr. Malcolm had not enjoyed those dinners, but he was glad now that he had accepted the invitations, for they had given him a certain insight into the character of this man for whom no one, not even his most intimate relations, had a good word to say. Gathered together in that house were the only relatives of Peter Browne, and not one of them had even a friendly thought for him: not one of them, excepting perhaps the sole person who was not a blood relation —the girl whom he had adopted. Her attitude, Mr. Malcolm realized, was probably governed by a feeling of gratitude to him for what he had done for her. But as evidence that she had very little love for this man who had befriended her and who had met with such a tragic and sudden end, her very attitude at that time was sufficiently revealing.

There had been something sinister about Peter Browne, Mr. Malcolm remembered: something which had always rather repelled him. He let his thoughts dwell upon this for some time, trying to realize what had caused that sensation. He was not accustomed to allow even the smallest detail to pass unnoticed and unconsidered when working on a case, and he had no desire on this occasion, when everything seemed so mystifying and so difficult, to let anything escape him which by a little thought might be induced to prove of assistance. He felt that possibly if he could just seize the why and wherefore of this inexplicable dislike it might be of use to him in judging the characters of those with whom he had to deal.

But Mr. Malcolm had reached the house before he had arrived at any conclusion at all. Even in death the man Peter Browne seemed to have retained that elusive secret to himself, and Mr. Malcolm was forced to the conviction that were there anything in it or any reason for the dislike which he had felt almost in spite of his inclinations, then it was beyond him now to discover the source. Probably it was merely because the man was vaguely evil, evil not so much in deed as in thought, evil because he had neglected his guardianship and because he was as hard by nature as any man or woman with whom in an extensive experience Mr. Malcolm had ever had to deal.

Mr. Malcolm entered the room in which he had left the others, and was at once the centre of all eyes. He smiled and seated himself in the chair which seemed, by common consent, to be reserved for him.

"Holding a little meeting?" he asked.

Mr. Yarrow, self-important as usual, rose to his feet.

"Mr. Malcolm," he said, "I've been asked to put before you a complaint which I think is perfectly reasonable."

"If you think so," said Mr. Malcolm, "I am quite sure that it is. Who makes it and what is it?"

In spite of the implied compliment in the words addressed to him, Mr. Yarrow was nervous. There was something in Mr. Malcolm's tone of voice and manner which did not give him confidence. He felt that the younger man might at any moment make a fool of him, and he knew that it was very easy for Mr. Malcolm to do this, since Mr. Yarrow felt a definite inferiority complex where he was concerned.

"Er—it comes from the Colonel," he said.

Mr. Malcolm looked across the room at the Colonel, who was rather red in the face and seemed to be on the point of bursting with some suppressed emotion.

"Surely," he said quietly, "the Colonel would prefer himself to make his own complaint?"

"Well," said Mr. Yarrow hurriedly, "I should like to join with him in making it. I . . . I may say, Mr. Malcolm, I feel the same myself."

"Oh," said Mr. Malcolm, "and who else subscribes to this view?"

"Well," said Mr. Yarrow, "you see, no one else could very well. Miss Alaris, Mr. Norman, and Mr. Waugh here are all largely . . ."

"Very largely," said the Colonel abruptly, "what we are complaining about."

"I think, Mr. Yarrow," said Mr. Malcolm quietly, "you had better let the Colonel make his own complaint, and then if you agree you can say so at the end. I think that the Colonel would be more comfortable if he said it himself than if you said it for him."

Mr. Yarrow subsided, and the colour of his countenance matched that of the Colonel.

"Look here, sir," said Colonel Browne, speaking directly at Mr. Malcolm in his orderly-room voice, a voice which he was accustomed to see men quail before, "there's much too much mystery going on in this house."

"I quite agree," said Mr. Malcolm. "You've no idea how much too much. I quite agree."

"Well, sir," said the Colonel, "if that's your view, why don't you make everything clear? Everybody seems to be going about whispering. I hate whispers. Everybody seems to be telling each other all sorts of things which they then pass on to you, but they never dream of passing on anything to anyone outside their own little circle. We all came here to hear my brother's will. We were interrupted, and I don't suppose we ever shall hear it now. But I'm not concerned with that. I am concerned with your interference. You're very busy . . . you seem to be finding out all sorts of things. Why don't you tell us something about your discoveries?"

"I will," said Mr. Malcolm, "if you give me a little more time, Colonel. I have every intention of letting you know everything that I know, but not just for the moment."

"Why not?" boomed the Colonel.

"For a reason of which I am quite sure you will approve," said Mr. Malcolm quietly. "I don't propose to tell you anything because I don't wish to lose all the advantage which my investigations so far have brought me."

"Advantage? Advantage to whom?"

"To you all," said Mr. Malcolm firmly, "excepting one. To all of you who wish to prove your innocence of the murder of Mr. Browne."

"Murder?" stuttered the Colonel.

For the first moment, the first moment in all the time that he had known him, Mr. Malcolm noticed that the Colonel was definitely taken aback. He lost abruptly some of the colour in his face: he was upset, and being as he was, a very direct man, he was utterly unable to disguise the fact. Mr. Malcolm, interested, noted this fact mentally, and he continued quickly, very largely in order to afford the Colonel time in which to recover:

"There's no doubt in my mind," he said, "about one thing. This morning, when I came into this room so unexpectedly and in such an odd manner, I had no idea of what was happening."

Vivien Waugh, who was seated beside Mr. Malcolm, muttered one word. It sounded extraordinarily like "Liar" to Mr. Malcolm, but he paid no attention, for he knew that no one else could possibly have heard the interruption.

"Then, when I heard what I did hear, and when, with your common consent, I took charge of the affair, I was not certain whether the coroner's verdict of suicide was correct or whether there really had been a crime in this house. Now I am certain. The Coroner's Jury did their best, but they returned an entirely erroneous verdict. Peter Browne was murdered: of that I am convinced."

Mr. Malcolm looked round the room and noted the rapt interest of everyone present. He smiled blandly, but abruptly stopped himself, realizing that perhaps a smile was scarcely the thing in the circumstances. Then he turned again to the Colonel.

"We have not yet found that record," he said. "I suggest that we should have a final search for it before dinner. Let us coördinate our search this time and waste no energy. Alaris—Norman—look in the upstair rooms of this house—all of them. Colonel, perhaps you and your wife would look around in the grounds. It's possible that the record may by now have been removed outside the house, but you need not go very far . . . only in the grounds. Look everywhere where you think it is at all likely that a place of concealment may have been found. Waugh, perhaps you will remain with me, and we will examine this room once more to make quite sure. Mr. Yarrow——"

But as he turned towards him Mr. Malcolm noticed that the solicitor was once more on his feet.

"Mr. Malcolm," he said, "I am sure you will realize that I am a professional man and a busy one. I have been here all day at your request, but I am not vitally concerned in this thing. All that I am here for is to see, as far as it is possible, that my late client's wishes are carried out. At the moment I cannot do this—in fact, not until the record is returned—but other work remains for me, and I feel that I must ask you to release me from my promise to stay."

Mr. Malcolm smiled.

"Thank you, Mr. Yarrow," he said. "Thank you very much for staying as long as you have done. Yes, I agree. You can do nothing further here, and you cannot, for the moment, be of any use to us. If no one else has any objection, certainly you may go. But you will leave me your telephone number, won't you?"

"Miss Alaris knows that," said Mr. Yarrow.

"And you won't be too far from it?" said Mr. Malcolm.

"No, I will leave a message wherever I may go."

"Well, in that case"—Mr. Malcolm looked around—"nobody has any objection."

Mr. Malcolm watched the little solicitor quickly collect his things, close his small black bag with a snap, and leave the room. He noticed that in his agitation and his desire to depart before Mr. Malcolm might conceivably alter his mind, he failed in the common courtesy of bidding everyone good-night. But Mr. Malcolm only smiled. He turned to the others.

"Well," he said, "let's get to work. What time do you dine, Alaris?"

"Oh, any time," she said.

Mr. Malcolm looked at his watch.

"It is just after seven," he said. "Shall we say eight o'clock for dinner? Then we will all have time for a search and a wash before. Is that agreed?"

No one raised any objection. Mr. Malcolm noted that now his lightest word seemed to become law.

"Very well, then," he said. "To work!"

The Colonel and his wife led the way from the room and went outside into the garden. Paul Norman, with a grateful glance towards Mr. Malcolm, took Alaris upstairs. Vivien Waugh and Mr. Malcolm were left alone in the room.

For a few moments the two remained silent. Mr. Malcolm was busy lighting a cigarette, and Vivien Waugh followed his example. The young man looked up as soon as it was lit, however, and for a few moments he watched Mr. Malcolm, who appeared to have gone into a brown study and was staring out of the window with thoughtful, half-closed eyes. Then he broke the silence.

"Mr. Malcolm," he said, "this record—is it of such vital importance now?"

"Why, of course it is," said Mr. Malcolm, coming out of his brown study with an abruptness which rather startled the younger man. "We've got to find out who it was that your uncle suspected of a desire to murder him."

"Will that help?" said Waugh. "After all, the man was half mad."

"Maybe," said Mr. Malcolm, "but we must leave no stone unturned, Waugh. As I said a few moments ago, I am convinced, absolutely convinced, that your uncle was murdered. I don't propose to rest until every avenue which might lead to the apprehension of the murderer has been explored."

"Dear, dear!" said Vivien Waugh, with a light laugh. "Quite the detective."

Mr. Malcolm smiled.

"You don't care one way or the other, perhaps," he said. "But I do . . . very much. You hated your uncle. I can't say that I liked him, but I had no active dislike for him. In any case, it's my job, and I don't like failing any more than any other man likes to fail in any enterprise. I want to find that record . . . and find it we must if it is still anywhere in this house."

Waugh looked surprised.

"What do you mean?" he said. "It must be in the house somewhere."

"Someone may well have removed it," said Mr. Malcolm. "You see, I know who took it in the first place, but neither that person nor myself knows where it is now."

"What?" said Vivien Waugh. "You know who took it?"

"Yes," said Mr. Malcolm quietly. "Your aunt, Miss Kate Browne, took it. She took it when my golf ball broke the window and I came into the room. She slipped it under the carpet . . . just here, I suppose." He pointed to the floor close beside the gramophone. "When she came back to find it, it had gone."

"Good Lord!" said Waugh.

Mr. Malcolm watched him closely, but the young man was obviously rather perturbed at the news, and deep in thought which the revelation evidently had provoked. Suddenly he looked up and caught the other's stare.

"Mr. Malcolm," he said, "I've just been thinking of something, something which, in the excitement of today, I had entirely forgotten about up to this moment."

"Ah!" said Mr. Malcolm, interested. "What is that?"

"Well," said Vivien Waugh, "it's something that I feel rather ashamed about. I ought to have remembered it before and told you, because I think it probably has a bearing on the case."

"Dear, dear!" said Mr. Malcolm petulantly. "These curious facts come out so late! If only people were more frank to start with! However . . . I suppose I can't blame you. I was a stranger in your midst, after all."

"You were a bit of a shock, you know," said Vivien Waugh.

"I must have been," said Mr. Malcolm. "Anyway, it's a good thing that I'm finding out all these things before, perhaps, it is too late. Tell me—what is it?"

"It's about old Kate," said Waugh slowly.

"I gathered that," said Mr. Malcolm. "And how impertinent you are with regard to your aunt."

"Wouldn't you be," said Waugh, "if she were yours?"

Mr. Malcolm found himself unable to think of a suitable reply.

"Well?" he said.

Vivien Waugh laughed.

"Anyway," he said, "she didn't love my uncle, either."

"I rather gathered that," said Mr. Malcolm, "when I had my interview with her."

"She loathed him almost as much as I did, I think. I don't know the reason, but I do know this: she wanted his death just as much as . . . well, as much as I did."

"Oh!" said Mr. Malcolm. "This is really very interesting; now why do you make this allegation?"

"Well . . ."—Waugh hesitated—"I know that she used to write him letters."

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Malcolm. "I've written lots of people letters, but that has not signified that I wanted to kill them!"

"No," said Waugh, "I know that. But not that sort of letter. She wrote him anonymous letters, and they were all threatening."

It was Mr. Malcolm's turn to be surprised.

"*What* did you say?" he asked.

"About once a week, I think," went on the younger man. "She used to write to him on an old typewriter that she's got in her home, picking out the letters, you know, one by one . . . telling people that she could type as fast as she could write, but finding it difficult to prove it to herself."

"One minute," said Mr. Malcolm. "How do you know all this?"

"Oh," said Waugh lightly, "the usual way. I went to see her one day. I've been to see all my relations on the same errand some time or other. I went to see the old geezer in order to borrow from her: but, needless to say, I came out without a penny."

"Dear, dear!" said Mr. Malcolm. "You seem to have been singularly unlucky——"

He never finished the sentence, but looked up and smiled. Vivien Waugh quickly responded to that smile.

"Very unlucky," he said impudently. "Anyway, while I was there I tried her typewriter. You see, when my name was sent up she spent some time thinking out an excuse for refusing what she knew I had come to ask for, and I spent that same time in her room. To idle away the leisure moments I tried to write a few words on the typewriter, and I noticed something odd about the machine."

"Oh," said Mr. Malcolm. "What was that?"

"The bottom of the capital 'Y' was broken off, so that it looked just like a small 'v' out of alinement. I never thought about it at the time. In fact, I never thought about it at all until very much later . . . the last time I saw my uncle alive."

"When you came to him," said Mr. Malcolm, "and told him about your rosy prospects, and how, if only he would lend you a little to get on with, everything would be all right."

"Almost my very words!" said Vivien Waugh promptly. "What a remarkable man you are, Mr. Malcolm! Yes, that was the occasion. My uncle was very upset. He was seated in this very room, in the chair by that desk. He had a letter in his hand, a typewritten letter, and it was some time before I could make him pay any attention to me and not to the letter. That so astonished me that, being of a curious nature——"

"And hoping," interposed Mr. Malcolm, "that you might benefit financially thereby."

"Not without that hope, I must admit . . . I managed to glance at the letter and read a few words. It was the usual sort of bilge, anonymous and threatening, but what struck me about the letter——"

"Was," said Mr. Malcolm, "that the bottom of each capital 'Y' was broken off."

"Had he ever lived," said Vivien Waugh, in mock admiration, "Sherlock Holmes, Mr. Malcolm, would have had nothing on you."

"Oh, yes, he would," said Mr. Malcolm. "He'd have had Dr. Watson to help him."

Vivien Waugh laughed.

"Perhaps that may become my rôle," he said.

Mr. Malcolm smiled.

"Seriously, Waugh, what you've told me is of very great interest," he said quietly; "the information provides the reason, the true reason, for the attempted removal of the record by Kate Browne. She gave me her explanation, but it wasn't in character and I couldn't believe it. However, I do believe that she lost it . . . that it was removed from under this carpet after she had placed it there. I want to know who removed it: I want to know that very much."

There was a short pause.

"I wonder if those letters are anywhere about?" said Mr. Malcolm suddenly.

"I'm afraid I must disappoint you." Waugh was speaking soberly. Perhaps the importance of their conversation was not lost on him. "I know, as a matter of fact, that every time he received those letters my uncle went into a fit of violent passion, a rage which he could not control. He never showed them to the police, however. He never enlisted their help to stop what was becoming a pestilence to him. That I never could understand. What he did do . . . what he did with that letter that I found him with, and what he did with the others, was to burn them at once. He put a match to that letter before my very eyes. He told me that he had received others and that he treated them in the same way. He had recovered his usual manner by the time that he had finished with me, probably through having to do the usual thing and refuse me a loan. He took the sheet of paper and set a match to it and let it burn in the grate here, but as he did so I caught sight of that broken 'Y.'"

"So he had received others?" said Mr. Malcolm.

"Yes, several, he gave me to understand."

"You didn't mention——" started Mr. Malcolm.

"Oh, no," broke in Vivien Waugh, "I never told him that it came from Kate, although I knew."

"Why not?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"Well," said Vivien Waugh, quietly, "surely a man of your intelligence must realize, Mr. Malcolm, that that knowledge might have been of use——"

"Oh," said Mr. Malcolm. "Financially again! No use telling him before you had discussed it with your aunt! What a rogue you are, Mr. Waugh!"

"Aren't I?" said Vivien Waugh, smiling. "Worse even than you think, perhaps."

"I have my ideas," said Mr. Malcolm. "You'd let me down at any time, wouldn't you?"

"At the moment," said Vivien Waugh, "no, but at any other time—yes."

"Well," said Mr. Malcolm, "it's just as well that we understand each other. I'm glad you wouldn't let me down at the moment. It relieves my mind a lot."

He laughed and so did Vivien Waugh. There was a moment of silence between them, a silence, however, that was entirely free from embarrassment, for Mr. Malcolm knew exactly how to treat the young man, this extraordinarily audacious young man, who was so entirely at ease in his presence.

But then, as if suddenly remembering something, Mr. Malcolm spoke sharply.

"To work!" he said. "We're forgetting our job! Think of all the others hard at work to help us . . . and the pair of us doing not a thing!"

"A delightful state of affairs!" said Vivien Waugh.

"Possibly," said Mr. Malcolm, "but not helpful. Come on!"

He turned to the bookcase and looked at it thoughtfully. It consisted of a set of shelves occupying the whole of one wall, and covering it entirely from the floor to within a foot or so of the high ceiling. The two bottom shelves were wide, almost twice as wide as were the others, and along these were placed the large books, covered numbers of periodicals, atlases, encyclopædias, and such bulky volumes as were too vast to be stored upon the upper shelves. For a second or two Mr. Malcolm considered these pensively, and then, with a quick movement, he approached the bottom shelves and proceeded to remove each book upon them, carefully one by one, with a thoroughness that made Vivien Waugh gasp in utter consternation.

"Good heavens," he cried in astonishment, "you're not going through the lot like that, are you? It'll take you all the night."

Mr. Malcolm smiled.

"No," he said quietly, "only these two shelves. Quite a good hiding place for a record here, you know. And it's worse than useless only half doing the thing. You'd better start that end."

Even while speaking Mr. Malcolm did not slacken for one moment in his task. Book after book was taken out and examined, the wall behind them also receiving its due attention, and then back they were slipped into place once more and his deft fingers reached out for a further volume.

Vivien Waugh raised his eyebrows ironically at this fresh invitation to labour.

"Right!" he drawled out casually, but he made no attempt whatsoever to remove himself from the table on which he was half supporting his weight.

At last Mr. Malcolm had completed his inspection of both shelves, but no record lurked anywhere within those books or on the portion of shelf that lay behind them.

For a few moments more, however, he continued his search, a casual one this time, of the remainder of the room, and with a gesture of mock resignation Vivien Waugh at last condescended to join in his efforts. But there was nothing: as before, the room presented few places of concealment, and of these none appeared to be harbouring that record. Beneath the carpet, under which, not unnaturally, Mr. Malcolm now made a careful search, only grey bits of dust and dirt rewarded his labours. At last he looked at his watch.

"Ten minutes to eight," he said. "Well, I think we've done our job. A wash—and then some food."

He moved towards the door, but when he was only a yard away he turned and faced the young man who was behind him.

"Waugh," he said, "if a man murders once, does he go on murdering?"

He paused a moment, deep in thought.

"I wonder! In other spheres that theory does apply. A man who makes a successful burglary in a certain manner will almost certainly try it twice . . . but in the case of murder . . ."

He paused again. Then suddenly he looked up at the young man in front of him, and his face was once more as bright as usual.

"Waugh," he said, and there was a mischievous note in his voice, "I expect to be killed at any moment. Isn't it awful!"

CHAPTER XVIII

DINNER was over, a fact for which all who had gathered there were sincerely thankful. For if lunch had been a silent meal, dinner had proved even less entertaining. Six had sat down to it, and of that number only one did any justice to the food placed before him. For even his tragic experience of that afternoon had not been able to impair appreciably the appetite of Vivien Waugh. Of every dish he had helped himself to generous portions, and if he was silent, this perhaps was only due to his surmise that were he to embark upon any light conversation such an effort would not be too happily received. Since lunch time that day something had happened to each one within that room, something which made the exchange of small-talk a thing too irksome to be ventured. Yet everyone seemed strangely happier: even Mr. Malcolm, although preoccupied, and perhaps rather surprised that the ferry crossing which he had proposed to make had turned into an ocean crossing, realizing now full well the dangerous nature of the waters over which he had embarked, occasionally smiled mischievously to himself. But from the others the strain of anxiety seemed now to have gone, and as he looked at them Vivien Waugh marvelled exceedingly at this curious change.

On the face of it, things were just as difficult as ever they had been, and yet in the eyes of Alaris and Norman a deep content had taken the place of fear, while between the Colonel and his wife something totally unusual must have occurred, for as he watched them Waugh saw the Colonel looking gently at her, a look in such utter variance to his normal churlish stare that it was almost alarming. Waugh noticed the imperturbable Mr. Malcolm, and noted that he seemed to be lighter of heart; there was a faint smile on his lips as he glanced around at his companions, a smile for which Waugh could in no way account. Yet silence hung like a pall about the room, and every individual felt relieved when at last the meal drew to a close.

Mr. Malcolm strolled to the front door, pulled it open, and stood there for a while, puffing thoughtfully at his cigarette and staring out at the stars with which the night had bedecked the sky. The craving for fresh air had become so intense that he could not delay a moment longer: there was an atmosphere about the house which filled him with distaste. No open windows could ever entirely dispel the mustiness within those walls, the gloomy dreariness that infused each room, and, as always, Mr. Malcolm felt a longing to escape.

He had not long, however, in which to enjoy the night air, for a hand grasped his arm and he heard a voice, a voice which for the moment he did not recognize, speak softly in his ear.

"Mr. Malcolm, could you spare me a moment? I . . . I've got something I want to tell you."

It was the Colonel who had spoken, and, turning round sharply, Mr. Malcolm was surprised to see that the man was not alone. Angela Browne, her face white and haggard, her eyes enormous in their great anxiety, was close behind him.

On the instant Mr. Malcolm was alert. There was a tenseness about these two which made it abundantly clear to him that it was for no trivial matter that the Colonel had thus disturbed him. The glance that he cast at them both was fleeting and seemingly casual, but to the mind of Mr. Malcolm it had conveyed more than a steady stare might to that of a man less versed in rapidity of perception. His voice when he replied, however, was entirely unmoved.

"Certainly, Colonel," he said; "where shall we go? Back to the sitting room? It's a little chilly out here."

The Colonel hesitated.

"I . . . I'm afraid the others are there now," he said, "and . . ."

"Right," broke in Mr. Malcolm promptly; "we'll go to the study. There'll be no one there. Around this way, I think."

And without another word he led the way to a room on the ground floor, which they were able to enter by means of an open French window. It was a small room, cold because of bare walls; an imposing desk and a few hard chairs comprised its only furniture. Mr. Malcolm switched on the light, shut the window, and pulled the curtains into place, then turned once more to his companions.

Angela Browne had seated herself on the extreme edge of a chair. She was looking at her husband with a curious interest, which Mr. Malcolm noticed with surprise. It was almost as though she were seeing him for the first time, discovering that this man, with whom she had lived for many years, was indeed a stranger to her, a stranger whose every action she viewed with increased surprise . . . and perhaps pleasure. But behind it all lay sorrow, a deep sorrow which he sensed was rooted in despair. Whatever it was that the Colonel had to say, it must be serious, so serious that it had raised this pompous, conceited little soldier to a dignity which he bore with a graceful naturalness of which Mr. Malcolm had not believed him capable. He had not seated himself, but stood with one hand on the chair in which his wife was seated. There was a bravery in his eyes, a calm courage which Mr. Malcolm could but marvel at. It was not thus that he had imagined Colonel Michael Browne would have faced despair. For that there was no hope in the Colonel's face was only too evident, and his next words made of this a certainty.

"I've come to give myself up, Mr. Malcolm," he said slowly. "I'm the man who murdered Peter Browne."

He stopped, and for a long time there was silence. Mr. Malcolm had taken a deep breath. The confession had come upon him so unexpectedly, so suddenly, that for the moment he felt again a yearning for fresh air. For a few seconds, also, he had a wild longing to burst into hysterical laughter, a longing which only the seriousness of the little Colonel's face prevented him from indulging. It seemed as though everyone within that house had been smitten by a fever for confessing: this was the third person who had come forward to announce himself the murderer of Peter Browne . . . Waugh, Alaris, and now the Colonel. Mr. Malcolm's lips quivered dangerously, and it was only a similar trembling on the lips of Angela Browne, a trembling which was born of tears and not of laughter, which enabled him to preserve his gravity. So it was Colonel Michael Browne who had fired that second shot! The fact amazed him, upset all his calculations, and for a long while Mr. Malcolm could find no words to utter. Then at last he spoke, and his voice was very steady, quite unmoved.

"Won't you—er—sit down and tell me all about it, Colonel Browne?" he said gently. "It . . . it's rather startling, isn't it?"

"Yes, rather startling, Mr. Malcolm. As you say . . . rather startling." The Colonel suddenly cleared his voice. "No . . . no, thanks; I won't sit down. I'd rather get this over first. It's . . . it's a little difficult . . . you see——" The Colonel hesitated, his cheeks became flushed, and he glanced as though for help at the white face of Angela Browne. "You see . . . it's got something to do with my wife."

"It's got everything to do with her," said Angela Browne quickly. She turned to Mr. Malcolm, and her eyes, large and mysterious, faced his bravely. "I'll tell you this part, Mr. Malcolm. My husband killed Peter Browne, but he did it for my sake. He . . . he had just found out that I was being blackmailed . . . blackmailed by Peter Browne."

Her lips trembled miserably, and she turned away towards the Colonel, who seized her hand and pressed it lightly. Then, without looking at either of them, the soldier, upright as he had never been before, walked blindly to the window, thrust aside the curtains, and stared out into the gathering dark. Mr. Malcolm waited for a moment; but then he urged the woman gently:

"He had been blackmailing you, Mrs. Browne? But . . . but why?"

Again there was silence, and then Angela Browne looked up and met the other's gaze squarely.

"Before I married my husband, Mr. Malcolm, I . . . I was very much in love with Peter Browne. I thought he loved me . . . that one day we would be married. I was very young then . . . only twenty . . . I had a lot of illusions in those days"—Angela Browne smiled, but her smile was very bitter—"but they didn't remain with me long. You see . . . I . . . we . . . had a child . . . it didn't live long, poor thing, just a few days, and . . . well, after I married the Colonel, Peter Browne kept threatening to tell him unless I paid him money."

"The *swine!*"

The words, coming from the window where the Colonel stood, startled Mr. Malcolm. He stared before him at the white face of Angela Browne, stared at the remains of what must once have been great beauty, and his whole soul rebelled at the thought of the utter folly that had ruined her life. So that was the secret of this strange, mysterious woman, the reason why she had thrown herself away upon the rotund little Colonel. But had she indeed chosen so badly? Mr. Malcolm was not now so sure. There was about this man a hint of nobility which no one had as yet suspected, least of all, he felt, the woman who sat before him and in whose eyes, as they rested on her husband, Mr. Malcolm could see more than a little tenderness.

"Yes . . . the swine!" reiterated the Colonel furiously. He had returned from the window and stood before Mr. Malcolm, his face suffused with anger, his features twitching nervously with agitation. "That's all you can call my brother . . . the only word that quite describes him. He'd always been it . . . he still would be if I hadn't . . . shot him. And I'm glad I did it . . . I don't regret it for one moment . . . don't think that, Mr. Malcolm . . . only . . . well, I thought I'd left no tracks behind me . . . that I should get clear away without being hung. . . .

Fancy being hung for giving trash like that what it deserves!"

"Please, Colonel." Mr. Malcolm spoke quickly. He could see that Angela Browne was not far from tears. "Please! Don't let us jump to conclusions. Won't you tell me all the details? You found out, I suppose, that your brother was blackmailing Mrs. Browne?"

"I did." The Colonel spoke quietly now; his voice was calm but very stern. "I found her crying one day . . . she had just asked me for money and I had refused it . . . she was always asking me for money lately . . . that swine had been increasing his demands. Well, I had noticed that she'd been receiving a lot of letters . . . in my brother's handwriting. He never even bothered to disguise it. Then I did a very dishonourable thing, Mr. Malcolm, but I'm glad I did it. You can't touch pitch when you're wearing kid gloves. I opened one letter, found out what was happening, and went along and stopped it."

"You mean . . . you spoke to your brother . . . told him you knew?"

"Oh, no." The Colonel's eyes flashed proudly. "I wasn't going to let that rotter know I'd found out . . . about Angela. . . . That would have given him too much pleasure."

"But"—Mr. Malcolm was puzzled—"I don't quite see how he dared to blackmail Mrs. Browne. Surely it was just as much to his interest that the thing should be kept a secret?"

"You didn't know my brother," said the Colonel contemptuously—"at least not properly: I hope not, for your sake! He wouldn't have minded that a bit—in fact, it probably would have delighted him for me to know. You see, he wanted to marry Angela himself long afterwards, when she was engaged to me, but she chose me instead . . . though God knows why."

"I knew then and I know now," said Angela gently, ". . . just why." She turned to Mr. Malcolm and added: "You see, all this business has always been between us . . . I . . . I've never really *known* my husband until now . . . until today . . . and now it's . . . it's too late."

She put her head in her hands: she could stand it no longer: Angela Browne began to sob.

"Oh, please," said Mr. Malcolm quickly. "You mustn't say that . . . it may not be too late."

"You won't think that when you've heard all I've got to say," put in the Colonel abruptly. "I'll tell you exactly what I did, Mr. Malcolm. I went straight to my brother's house . . . this house . . . waited until he had gone to bed, then I pushed open the door and . . . shot him."

"You . . . you *what?*" cried Mr. Malcolm loudly.

He was staring at Michael Browne, staring with an utter lack of his usual calm detachment. A sudden extraordinary thought had come to his mind, an incredible idea which had jolted him, shocked him almost out of his habitual composure.

The Colonel looked at him in surprise.

"I . . . I shot him," he stammered, somewhat aggressively. "I've been telling you so all the time."

"Yes, yes, I know that," said Mr. Malcolm in agitation. "What I mean is . . . *how* did you do it—*exactly*, I mean?"

"I've just told you," said the Colonel irritably. "I waited until he'd gone to bed, then crept to the door and shot him."

"Without entering the room?"

Mr. Malcolm spoke the words tensely, almost in a whisper, and Angela Browne looked at him in astonishment. She had ceased to sob now, and was watching the two men with anxious eagerness.

"Of course, without entering the room. I opened the door very cautiously, and looked at the bed. I'd guessed he was there, because . . ."

"Because Alaris had just been in to see him," put in Mr. Malcolm quickly.

The Colonel looked at him curiously.

"How did you know that?" he asked.

"Never mind," said Mr. Malcolm curtly. "Go on; what happened next?"

"I had a silencer on my automatic. I took careful aim and pulled the trigger. The gun made a click, and I heard the plaster fall from the wall. I suppose the bullet must have gone clean through his head. I didn't go in to see, however. I just shut the door again and left quickly. I was nervous, and I thought I heard someone coming. When they brought it in as suicide I thought I'd get clear away, but today

. . . that record . . . it upset me a lot, Mr. Malcolm, and I told my wife . . . I'm very glad about that . . . she . . . she's been splendid about it . . . splendid!"

Mr. Malcolm did not speak. Into his face had crept a curious, an alert look. He was thinking rapidly, trying to piece together all that he had been told that day; trying to fathom why it was that two separate men should have come to him with identically the same confessions; trying to understand what lay behind it all.

And suddenly he knew.

A smile, a strangely cynical yet half-admiring smile, crept to his lips. For another moment he remained quite silent, and then, turning to Angela Browne, he patted her lightly on the arm.

"Don't cry, Mrs. Browne," he said. "Your husband is not guilty."

The Colonel stood as though rooted to the spot, while his wife lifted her head and stared at Mr. Malcolm; but although she seemed unable to realize his words, Mr. Malcolm saw a glimmering dawn of hope in her eyes.

"But . . ." stammered the Colonel—"but I . . . I *shot* him."

"You shot *at* him," said Mr. Malcolm calmly.

"Do you mean . . . do you mean that I missed him?"

"That's precisely what I do mean," said Mr. Malcolm calmly. "The shot you fired at Peter Browne did not kill him . . . did not even hit him.

You did not kill your brother. Your bullet hit the wall and made the plaster fly, but it didn't go through his head."

Angela Browne had jumped to her feet and stood staring at Mr. Malcolm, her face, if possible, even more white than before.

"Then you mean . . .?"

"I mean that your husband did not murder Peter Browne. He was killed by the second shot of two, and the bullet that killed him was fired close to his head . . . that was why a verdict of suicide was brought in. Who . . ."

But Angela Browne had tottered, as though about to fall, and both Mr. Malcolm and her husband rushed to her side. A carafe of water lay upon the desk, and in a moment Michael Browne had filled a glass and made her drink it.

"I . . . I think I'll go to my room," she said at last. "I don't understand it all yet . . . and it's been a very trying day."

Mr. Malcolm smiled.

"I don't quite understand it all myself yet, Mrs. Browne," he said gently. "But you can sleep quite peacefully. Whoever murdered Peter Browne it was *not* your husband."

"Good-night, Mr. Malcolm," said the Colonel hoarsely. "I . . . I don't know how to thank you . . . it's . . . it's more than I deserve, but . . ."

"But you've been lucky," said Mr. Malcolm, smiling. "Well, we all get more luck than we deserve

—at least, most of us do . . . and I'm not sure that you don't deserve it. Good-night, Colonel Browne. I'm coming up myself. As your wife says, it's been a very trying day, and I know I'm yearning for my bed."

Mr. Malcolm spoke cheerily: he was really happy at last.

A few moments later Mr. Malcolm watched the Colonel and his wife enter their bedroom murmuring further incoherent thanks, and then, with a light step, he walked to his own room.

Once within, however, Mr. Malcolm showed no desire to seek that rest of which he had declared himself so much in need. Instead he lit a cigarette and, puffing it thoughtfully, walked up and down his room, a worried frown upon his forehead. For five minutes he continued this perambulation, and then, removing his shoes and putting on a pair of bedroom slippers, he tiptoed lightly to the door, opened it, listened awhile, and then crept gently along the corridor and down the stairs.

CHAPTER XIX

ARRIVED at the bottom step, Mr. Malcolm hesitated for a moment, while he remained quite still, listening intently, gazing up into the blackness of the stairs down which he had so silently descended. Then, with the same stealthy tread, he tiptoed quickly across the hall and into the fateful sitting room wherein so much had happened throughout that day. Within, the room was very dark, and Mr. Malcolm shivered slightly as he hastened across the floor towards the curtained windows to his left. Pushing the heavy velvet slightly to one side so that the moonlight streamed brightly into the room, Mr. Malcolm turned towards the wall behind, towards those shelves of books over which he had spent so much time in examination that afternoon. Only a small portion of these shelves was clearly visible, and turning once more to the curtains, with deft fingers he pulled one a little farther back and rearranged the other so that light fell in a gentle ray on no other part of the room save on those crowded rows of books. A second more he deliberated, his eyes piercing the gloom in search of that hiding place which was so essential to his purpose.

The great desk at which the dead man had sat to read those threatening letters which had so distressed him loomed vaguely before him in the dark, and for a moment Mr. Malcolm wondered whether perhaps this might not prove a likely shelter. He took one step forward, but another glance at those book-lined shelves made him hesitate. For from that desk it was impossible to observe them clearly. But Mr. Malcolm required shelter, and it was more with the eyes of his mind and memory than by any ordinary vision that the details of the room sprang into line before him. A black mass hung limply on the left at the far end of the room, and with a grateful smile Mr. Malcolm realized that here lay his hiding place. The room was a long one, stretching from the front to the back of the house, and set in the wall on the right was a window, not so large, perhaps, as that over which he had expended so much care a few minutes before, but large enough to provide adequate room for him to lie concealed behind its curtains upon the cushioned surface of the window-seat.

In a second Mr. Malcolm had taken a step forward, swung the great curtains apart, and had slipped behind them. Crouched down in the extreme corner, he arranged the velvet so that it hung loosely before him, loosely enough to provide a slit through which he could view the room beyond, and most particularly those bookshelves which the ray of moonlight enabled him to see. There he set himself to wait.

There was nothing else to be done: events must now occur of themselves.

It was very hot behind those curtains, and after a while the head of Mr. Malcolm drooped gradually lower and lower. He had had a long day, and sleep hung heavily upon his eyelids. Ten minutes . . . twenty minutes passed, and Mr. Malcolm began to doze. But even as his head drooped slightly lower, even as his breathing assumed the steadiness that presages slumber, he jerked his head up quickly and opened his eyes wide in consternation. For a second his heart beat loudly, and he cursed himself for such a useless vigil. Had he really been asleep? And if so, how long? Too long? Had he missed that which he had stolen down to see?

Full of disgust at his own criminal idleness, Mr. Malcolm raised his right wrist and thrust aside the cuff of his coat. Then, with eager eyes, he glanced down at the luminous hands of his watch. With a relief which found an outlet in a smile, he dropped his arm once more and pushed aside the curtains gently. Only twenty minutes had elapsed . . . his doze could not have been so heavy as to bar his awakening had that noise for which he waited come to his ears. Also, and what was even more reassuring, that which he had come down to see would hardly have taken place so early.

With deep thanksgiving in his heart and an earnest resolve to remain awake henceforth, Mr. Malcolm cast one glance into the empty room and then crouched down once more upon the cushioned seat. An hour passed thus, and throughout that time thoughts, thoughts not calculated to induce good slumber, flitted swiftly through his brain. The house was silent, but in that silence Mr. Malcolm could hear a thousand eerie sounds, sounds like whispers: the sighing of the wind in the branches of the trees outside, the tapping of those same branches upon the windows, the creaking of the furniture, the sudden snap of wood long since decayed, and other noises, noises for which he could in no way account, but which night time and a lonely vigil within a house wherein one man had so recently been murdered did much to render sinister. Although a man whose courage no one had ever been known to deny, Mr. Malcolm felt that not one period of his eventful day had been so nerve-racking, so entirely agitating, as this solitary watching in the dead of night.

It was, therefore, with a great feeling of relief that Mr. Malcolm became at last aware of a sudden noise, a noise of furtive footsteps, that very sound for which he had waited and watched so long. Crouching still farther back behind the curtains he stiffened tensely, listening with eager ears for the sound to be repeated, for that gentle whisper of feet upon a carpet which was becoming at every moment perceptibly clearer. His eyes, trained to the darkness, were fixed upon the door, and suddenly, with an utter lack of any creak, he saw this open slowly, open just sufficiently to allow of one person's entrance. Quickly a black shape slipped into the room; he heard again the whisper of feet upon the floor, and then into the ray of moonlight came a crouching figure.

On the instant Mr. Malcolm pushed the curtains back, craning his head to see who it was whose business lay within that room so late at night. But, with a suddenness which surprised and dismayed the watching man, the figure had darted quickly out of the moonlight and into the shadows of the room beyond. Yet there was a familiarity about that frame, about the very poise of the head which he could faintly see, that made Mr. Malcolm catch his breath in a sudden knowledge. Into his mind there leapt a gratifying thought, the welcome realization that his supposition had been correct. Hardly daring to breathe, he watched with tense nerves while the figure darted silently towards the bookshelves. Something was happening there: exactly what it was he could not see, but Mr. Malcolm felt in no way over-anxious to be assured that what he had long expected was now occurring. So far his suspicions had been correct: there was no reason to doubt that what he had expected should not now be taking place. There was the sudden sound as of a book being slipped gently into place, and then back into the moonlight came that dark shape, and the watcher slipped once more behind the curtains, remaining there, motionless and stiff, until a slight creak from the door told him that again this had been closed and that he was now alone.

A few seconds longer he waited; and then, pushing aside the curtains, he stared out again into the moonlit room. As he did so Mr. Malcolm gave a sigh of relief. His assumption had been correct: the room was empty.

Mr. Malcolm had a curious feeling of elation. Things were becoming so very much more clear to him, things that had worried him throughout the day, from that first moment when he had followed his golf ball through the broken pane of glass. He was also pleased, decidedly pleased, at the success of his manœuvre. He had expected that nocturnal visitor to the sitting room that evening: he had expected just such movements as he had been enabled to watch: he had guessed, actually before it had all happened, the mission which one member of that household—who ought to have been asleep in bed upstairs—would feel compelled to carry out before the night was over, and Mr. Malcolm had desired very much indeed to be present at the time in order to observe without himself being observed. Mr. Malcolm was delighted, so delighted that he did not, for one moment, grudge the loss of sleep which his vigil had entailed, nor the additional strain that it had put upon his nerves.

Holding aside the curtains, he noiselessly left his hiding place and entered the room. He was smiling to himself in the dark. His movements were no longer uncertain, as they had been many times in the twelve hours which had preceded that moment. Now there was an assurance about him which bode ill for the unknown person whom he was pursuing. He advanced towards the bookcase and stood before it a moment, almost as if he were gloating over what he knew he was about to find. But even as he stood there, so pleased with the result of his calculations, so delighted with the thought of the discovery which he was about to make, a noise at the window which he had just left made him turn his head sharply and freeze to the spot, much as a setter will freeze at the scent of game. But unlike the dog, which will remain rooted to the spot pointing to the quarry which is soon to fall a prey to his master's gun, Mr. Malcolm sensed in that first moment that here was a new development, an entirely unexpected development, and something which, could he but make proper use of it, might prove of great assistance to him, and he moved.

Not for one moment did he hesitate, but turning quickly, he looked around to see a dark corner where the moon's rays did not penetrate. Just before him was an easy chair with a high back upholstered in leather, beyond which the darkness seemed even more intense. In a moment he was behind this, crouching on the floor, ready to observe once more without himself being seen.

Then and then only did the nearness of his escape come home to him. Beads of perspiration mounted his forehead, his hands seemed clammy, and for a second an icy chill seemed to paralyze all his limbs.

For Mr. Malcolm was utterly at a loss to account for this second invader of his solitude; nothing in his calculations had led him to expect it, and not for a moment had he any idea who it could be. The realization that had his first visitor delayed a moment longer, or had this new arrival timed his advent a little earlier, then he himself must most surely have been discovered, filled Mr. Malcolm with a keen appreciation of the narrowness of his escape. But even as these thoughts came to his mind the attention of Mr. Malcolm was directed to those curtains behind which he had so recently lain concealed. For he could see that they were moving gently and that someone very carefully was preparing to enter the room.

Mr. Malcolm remained quite still. Almost he held his breath in an attempt to evade discovery, for he was fully aware that at that very moment the intruder was examining the room, peering into the darkness so as to be assured that when once he or she ventured to enter there would be no danger of somebody lurking in the shadows to spy upon the intruder's movements, to accomplish, in fact, precisely what Mr. Malcolm hoped so much he might be enabled to achieve. It was a moment of uncertainty . . . but to his immense relief it did not last very long, for a few seconds later Mr. Malcolm noticed that the curtains were being pushed apart and that a figure was about to enter. Almost before he knew it somebody else besides himself was within that room.

At first he could see very little of the indistinct lines which his strange visitant made, but when the slight dark shape moved towards the desk it had to pass within that ray of moonlight which Mr. Malcolm had so carefully arranged should shine upon the bookcase immediately behind it, and in that moment he recognized this unexpected arrival. He made no sound, no sudden intake of breath, nothing that could in any way have betrayed his presence, but had that intruder known of his whereabouts and been enabled to see his face, it would have been possible to note that the quiet smile of satisfaction which had scarcely left Mr. Malcolm's face ever since the success of his plans that evening had deepened into a grin. Mr. Malcolm felt more than pleased: what he had expected had happened, but now the unexpected was coming into line and working in his favour.

The slight figure sat down at the desk and very carefully began to open the drawers. Mr. Malcolm from behind his chair watched it carefully, and saw the shine of a small electric torch directed into each drawer. This was no ordinary burglar, as Mr. Malcolm knew quite well, since he had already recognized the identity of the intruder. For each drawer was submitted to a careful scrutiny before being closed again and the next one opened. This was no haphazard search for jewelry or money-making plunder: it was a careful inspection of all the letters that lay within that desk. Mr. Malcolm reflected that Peter Browne must have been a very methodical man, for pile after pile of letters, each bound carefully about with a piece of tape, did Mr. Malcolm see his visitor remove. Deftly the tape was slipped from off the packets, the envelopes and sometimes the letters themselves quickly scanned, and then thrust back once more into the open drawer. But he noticed that the figure did not pause to return those pieces of tape back to the packets. Haste, it appeared, was a very essential factor, and in the darkness Mr. Malcolm smiled again.

For a little while longer he allowed this performance, which was to him a comedy, to continue without interruption, then suddenly and quite fearlessly he rose to his feet and spoke.

"My dear Miss Browne," he said, "it really isn't necessary for you to look in there. All the letters for which you are looking were destroyed by your late brother."

At the very first sound of his voice the electric torch had been extinguished, and for a long moment after his words had died away into the darkness Kate Browne, shrouded in a black cloak and seated at that desk, remained quite still, striving all she could to recover from her great astonishment. Mr. Malcolm, who was sensing to the full the keen joy of having staged so unexpected an appearance, suddenly decided that he was being a trifle cruel.

"Miss Browne," he said, "you've nothing to fear from me if you are honest with me; I've proved that to you this afternoon. At the time I didn't think you were being entirely honest—and you were not. You gave me a definitely false reason for getting hold of that record made by your brother, but . . . you were innocent of his death; and that I knew, and I believed you. I want you to return the compliment. I want you now to believe in me. I know practically everything, all except one or two small points. If you will be so kind as to tell me all your side now, I promise you that you will have nothing to fear from me."

He stopped, and for a long time there was silence, a silence which Mr. Malcolm was in no way impatient to break. For he sensed, quite rightly, that Kate Browne, to whom the realization of his presence must have been a bitter shock, was temporarily unable to trust her voice sufficiently to reply. He heard her breathing heavily, the jerky, faltering breathing of a person whose nerves have been strained to the utmost. At last to his ears came the sharp tones of Miss Browne's voice from the desk before him.

"Somebody said you were a pest earlier today, and I subscribed to that view. I must say that I still think you are."

"Not altogether," said Mr. Malcolm ingratiatingly.

"All right," said Miss Browne. "I'll tell you. Come over here."

Mr. Malcolm moved over to the darkness from which her voice was coming. He smiled again to himself as he did so. What an extraordinary interview this was, in the dead of night, with the redoubtable little spinster! But without a word he pulled a chair up to the table and sat down upon it.

"I'll tell you everything," said Miss Browne.

"Just one moment," said Mr. Malcolm. "Wouldn't we be more comfortable if we had just a little light? I don't mean to put the light on—of course that would just tell others that somebody was in this room, but . . . Ah! I have it."

He rose from his seat, moved over to the window, and pulled the curtains back into place so that no light entered the room.

"No one can now see us from the outside," he said. "If you turn your electric torch on again and leave it on the desk it will give us all the light that we require."

Miss Browne obeyed his instructions, and a moment or two later there they were, seated on opposite sides of that desk, the electric light throwing a beam between them which just enabled Mr. Malcolm to make out the drawn features of the elderly spinster, who was looking even more haggard than ever in the strange light.

"I hated my brother, Mr. Malcolm," she began immediately, with no preamble.

"You've told me that," said Mr. Malcolm, "already. After all . . . he's dead. Don't let us dwell on it."

"Yes," said Miss Browne. "It is ugly! But he was an ugly man, Mr. Malcolm. I don't mean in features so much as in character. I don't know anyone who liked him . . . that's why I dwell on it. It excuses me, perhaps, a little."

She laughed, but it was a hard laugh, a laugh in which there was no mirth, no humour.

"I don't really require to excuse myself," she said suddenly, her words, evidently, expressing her thoughts aloud. "I'd do it again, I think, in the same circumstances. But I didn't kill him, Mr. Malcolm . . . although I tried to."

"Another!" said Mr. Malcolm. He could not restrain the word.

"What?" asked Miss Browne, slightly surprised.

"Nothing," said Mr. Malcolm. "Please go on."

"I wrote him several letters," continued the woman on the other side of the desk, in a calm, even voice. "They were anonymous, but he found out from whom they came."

"What?" said Mr. Malcolm. "I thought he didn't know?"

"Oh, no, he knew all right," said Miss Browne, "but he only knew the day before he died. One morning . . . the same morning that I heard of his death . . . I received a letter from him telling me that that young scoundrel Vivien Waugh had tried to sell him the knowledge, but that he had forced it out of him. I think I've got the letter with me."

She paused for a moment in her story and slipped one hand into her pocket. She produced a crumpled envelope and handed this over to Mr. Malcolm, who opened the letter and scanned it quickly in the light of the torch. He then thoughtfully returned it to the envelope and placed this carefully within an inside pocket. For a moment he was silent, and then he murmured gently:

"I see . . . I see."

He came out of his thoughts abruptly, and turned once more to his companion, waiting for her to continue.

"How he did it," went on Kate Browne, "Heaven only knows, but he must have squeezed it out of him without paying a penny piece for it. Knowing my brother, I am certain of that. Apparently there was something wrong with my typewriter, something which Vivien Waugh knew, and which he gave away to my brother."

"What were in those letters?" asked Mr. Malcolm suddenly.

"They were threatening letters," replied Miss Browne, without a hint of passion in her voice. "Threatening letters which I hoped would upset him very much. I knew his state of health, you see. I knew that if only it could be . . ."

She paused.

"Could be increased?" suggested Mr. Malcolm.

"Not increased, but could be played upon, he would get worse."

"And if he got worse?" said Mr. Malcolm.

"Then," said Miss Browne quietly, "he would have died."

"I see," said Mr. Malcolm.

He paused. He hesitated for some time before asking the question which was on the tip of his tongue.

"And what benefit, Miss Browne," he said at last, ". . . you will excuse the question, I know, as it is most important . . . what benefit would come to you from his death?"

For a long time Miss Browne made no reply, but sat in silence. Mr. Malcolm decided to help her still further.

"Surely," he said, "it was not merely your hate that dictated this course of action to you? Surely it was not merely that you wanted him out of your way? Was there not some reason stronger than that?"

"There are very few things, Mr. Malcolm," replied the woman, "which are stronger than hate. But . . . yes . . . there was a reason. I hated my brother to such an extent that I might have been"—she laughed harshly—"guilty of such actions even without any other motive. But I had a motive . . . a strong motive. This house, Mr. Malcolm, was the house of my father and mother. I've known it as my home. It was left to my brother, Peter, and should he have died without an heir it had to come to me. I thought that my brother was going to marry Alaris."

"Good God!" said Mr. Malcolm. "But she'd never have . . ."

Miss Browne stopped him in the middle of his sentence.

"My dear Mr. Malcolm," she said, "you can never be sure with a girl."

"But she was in love with Paul Norman," said Mr. Malcolm quickly.

"Oh, I know," said Miss Browne, "but love doesn't always dictate the choice of a husband." Suddenly she rose to her feet. "Mr. Malcolm," she said, "I've told you the truth. You made me a promise if I should tell you the truth. You'll keep to it, won't you?"

Mr. Malcolm also rose, and when he spoke his voice was very serious.

"Dear lady," he said, "I've never broken a promise in my life."

The words, which might have sounded melodramatic, perhaps even pretentious, on the lips of any other, as spoken by Mr. Malcolm were merely the simple statement of a fact. He was obviously sincere, and Miss Browne accepted his word without question.

"There's one thing that you can tell me, Mr. Malcolm," she said. "You told me, when you first made your presence known to me tonight, that I would not find the letters that I had written to my brother. Why? Where are they?"

"They were all destroyed, one by one," said Mr. Malcolm, "as they were received."

"How do you know?"

Mr. Malcolm smiled, but the smile was lost in the darkness.

"Vivien Waugh told me," he said.

"I see," said Miss Browne tartly. "But that young man's word is worthless."

"Worthless sometimes, Miss Browne, but sometimes of great value. In this instance I know that he was telling the truth. I've not only got his word for it, but I have corroboration from an entirely disinterested source . . . the doctor who attended your brother."

There was a pause, a pause fraught with suspense for Mr. Malcolm. For suddenly he sensed that Miss Browne was very near to the breaking point; that, now that her anxieties were over and the worry of that day at an end, her nerves, which had been keyed up for many hours to combat the set of circumstances which had been so unexpected and had almost deprived her of her longed-for inheritance, might snap at any instant. And besides this, he realized that Miss Browne was about to say something to him, something which would make him feel intensely awkward, was about to thank him for what he had done for her, perhaps for his having believed her. Quickly Mr. Malcolm took command of the occasion, and thus prevented the embarrassment of such an outburst.

"Now," he said, "Miss Browne, before you go, would you like to hear the record?"

For a moment the purport of his words surprised the woman out of the ability to reply. But at last she spoke:

"You've found the record?"

"Well," said Mr. Malcolm, "strictly speaking, I suppose I cannot claim that. It has been brought to me."

He walked over to the bookcase.

CHAPTER XX

No MOONLIGHT streamed down on the bookcase now, yet Mr. Malcolm's fingers played unerringly upon the book in which he knew so well the record had been placed. A second later he turned back towards Kate Browne, and in his hands he was holding a shiny circular disc. The expression on her face was almost laughable: surprise, fear, and a grotesque touch of reluctant admiration fought for mastery in her eyes, and it was in rather a stunned voice that at last she spoke.

"It . . . it's positively uncanny," she murmured slowly.

Mr. Malcolm laughed.

"Uncanny? Well, hardly that . . . shall we say the result of a winning move? It's checkmate, my dear Miss Browne—checkmate, I think."

"But"—she was still looking at him with startled eyes—". . . but how *did* you find it, Mr. Malcolm? How did you know it was there?"

Again he laughed, but he did not reply. Instead he walked quickly over to the small table on which was standing the portable gramophone that had been the centre of so much excitement not many hours before. This part of the room was particularly dark, and Mr. Malcolm stumbled on a chair; but he had made very little noise, and the record was still firmly clasped within his fingers. Mr. Malcolm stood quite still for a few moments, listening intently to hear if anyone had been disturbed. But there was no sound in the house, and turning quickly to Kate Browne, who had remained standing beside the desk as though totally incapable of any movement, he murmured curtly:

"The torch, Miss Browne, if you please. I daren't risk breaking this record."

In a moment she was by his side, the torch resting on the table, and together they carefully removed the cover of the machine and placed the disc upon it.

"But . . .. but won't it wake everybody up?" said Miss Browne anxiously. "I don't want to be discovered, you know."

Mr. Malcolm laughed shortly.

"You won't be," he said. "A pin hasn't got quite the volume of the more conventional type of gramophone needle . . . but it can be immensely useful at times."

Slipping his fingers behind the lapel of his coat, Mr. Malcolm produced a pin, which he proceeded to screw tightly within the sound box of the machine. Kate Browne watched his actions in astonished silence. Mr. Malcolm, she was beginning to realize, could always be relied upon to do surprising things: on the beaten track his adventurous footsteps never seemed to wander. For a second she pondered this fact, and then the slow rasping of the pin upon the surface of the record, the steady whispered scratching which she had already heard twice within the last few hours, stiffened her into a tense forgetfulness of everything save those bitter words which had so appalled her the first time she had heard them.

Mr. Malcolm was looking at her, watching, with the deepest interest, the taut lines of her face, half in shadow, half in the steady glare of the electric torch. And as he watched, as the first words of her brother's voice came faintly, very faintly, from that revolving disc, he saw her for one moment close her eyes and reel slightly, as though she were about to faint. But in a moment, before the thought of such a possibility had even time to spur him into action, Kate Browne had recovered control once more. She opened her eyes again and her mouth hardened visibly. In another second she had slipped down into a chair and was leaning forward, following the movement of the disc with fascinated eyes.

"*If George Yarrow has done his work,*" came the voice of Peter Browne, "*I am now talking to my brother and his wife, my sister, my adopted daughter and her lover, also my nephew. You know that I am dead—well, let me tell you this . . . there can be no possible doubt that I have been murdered. Throughout the last year someone has been trying to kill me . . . I have an enemy, an implacable enemy, whose threats* *have made of my days a living torture. Each week I have received letters, letters promising me death in every form, and only by almost superhuman care have I managed to outwit my persecutor. Who it is I do not know, but from the tomb in which I shall be buried when at last you hear my words I curse that person, curse him! May death come tragically upon him as it has on me . . . may he suffer agonies . . . agonies of pain and fear before he dies . . . may he be hung . . . hung upon the highest gibbet that yet exists so that his name becomes a byword through the land. But it is my firm conviction . . . and I hope that George Yarrow will make known this to the police . . . that among the people present is the one who has murdered me. Only a loving relative would have had sufficient motive, and the Brownes have ever been a most united family . . ."*

The last words were said with so much malice, so repulsive a sarcasm, that Mr. Malcolm could not restrain a shudder of aversion. He cast a swift glance towards the white face of Kate Browne, and what he saw appalled him. It was not so much that she seemed entirely bloodless, not so much that the haggard lines of her features appeared to have deepened appreciably so that they looked as though hewn from the whitest marble, but there was in the utter stillness of her face, the entire lack of expression in her eyes, a frozen, inanimate look which gave to Kate Browne the appearance of something that was scarcely human, a taut fanatical tenseness perhaps to be seen on the face of a witch in olden days when attending some satanic revelry.

Only for a second did Mr. Malcolm glance towards her, and then the faint rasping voice from the record once more riveted his attention.

"*. . . United in life . . . united in death,*" went on the detestable voice, "*like vultures at a corpse, I am sure they will gather around, ready to grasp all that they can of what I leave behind. Well, I, Peter Browne, have the last laugh upon them . . . for to them I leave nothing, nothing save my dearest hate. All that I have I leave to my adopted daughter Alaris . . . all, that is, except this house, which most unfortunately must now descend to my abominable sister Kate. But on one condition only can Alaris inherit . . . on the strict understanding that not one penny does she lend to my good-for-nothing nephew Vivien Waugh.*

"*And now, George Yarrow, do your duty . . . inform the police and let no stone remain unturned until my murder has been avenged . . . until my murderer's bones lie rotting at last in some ignominious grave.*"

The last words died away with a sudden gasp, and, with a quick movement, Mr. Malcolm removed the record and stopped the machine. Then, with hands that seemed unusually clumsy, he proceeded to remove his pin from the sound box and close up the gramophone once more. Mr. Malcolm purposely made of this task a rather lengthy business, for he felt that Kate Browne must be given a few moments in which to recover from that frozen stupor into which the record had so stiffened her. As well, he had no desire to look just yet upon that face which was so far removed from that of any other woman he had ever seen. So it was not until several minutes had elapsed, when the rasping voice of the dead man seemed no longer to echo in his ears, that at last he spoke.

"Charming old gentleman!" he said lightly, with a lightness which he was very far from feeling, yet sensed was imperative to relieve the tension in that room. "Such appealing ideas! Ugh! He makes me long for fresh air. What about your train, Miss Browne? Shall we go straight to the station now, or would you rather wait a little longer?"

Still Mr. Malcolm refrained from looking at the woman. He seized the record and, with the aid of the electric torch, placed it once more within that book from which he had removed it. Again he gave to this task far more deliberation than it really called for, but even so it was not until he had once more returned to the table at which Kate Browne was still seated that she broke the silence. Her voice, when she spoke, was very strained, hovering dangerously upon the edge of wild hysteria.

"No . . . no, let's go at once," she said harshly. "I . . . I can't stand this house a moment longer. I never want to put my foot in it again."

And with the words she jumped up, so suddenly that Mr. Malcolm was taken by surprise. In a second she had moved across the room, thrown back the curtains before the window seat, and was clambering noiselessly out into the moonlit garden. With a like rapidity and absence of sound Mr. Malcolm followed: together, without a word being spoken, they crept silently along the drive, past the sleeping house, to which the darkness seemed to have imparted an additional touch of gloom, to the large wooden gate which led to the garage. Approach to the house was possible by two ways: up the flagged moss-strewn path to that iron-studded front door, or past the garage to a small door at the side, a door which, however, was never used save by the servants. It was, therefore, with small fear of meeting any person —should anyone be moving at that hour of night, which was most unlikely—that the two sped gingerly along, taking advantage of every tree, of every obstacle that provided darkness, and to the soft accompaniment of strange words which Mr. Malcolm used to comfort himself that he was only shod in bedroom slippers.

At last they reached the road and soon were out of vision from the house. Then and then only did Mr. Malcolm cast a glance at Kate Browne's face. What he saw there froze the questions on his tongue: impossible to discuss the possibility of an early train with a woman on whose face tragedy had left a mark which not even time, he felt convinced, would ever entirely erase. Her lips were pressed together tightly, drooping downwards at the corners; her cheeks were hollow, startlingly hollow, and with that same marble whiteness which he had before remarked. So Peter Browne had been well revenged! Perhaps a realization of the dangerous abyss over which she had been walking had just become clear to this woman: but for certain facts that Mr. Malcolm knew, things might indeed have been extremely awkward for her. Well, she had attained her heart's desire . . . the great house was now her own, but, as sometimes happens when evil deeds have been enacted to achieve a purpose, possession had turned to ashes within her grasp. The house was hers, but with memories so tragic that she hastened to escape far from it.

It was, therefore, in an awkward silence that they strode along, heading towards the little country station a few hundred yards away. Ten minutes later they had arrived, and after making inquiries as to the time of the early morning train to town, Mr. Malcolm said good-bye to Kate Browne, who had still an hour to wait, leaving her crouched up within the capacious folds of her black cloak upon a seat in the cheerless waiting room, looking like some enormous bird of prey engraved in stone. Which was very much what she was, reflected Mr. Malcolm to himself, as he walked briskly once more upon his way, a bird of prey . . . but, with a poetical justice which is so often lacking from the affairs of living men, she had herself fallen victim to her own rapacious greed.

It was with a feeling as though he were now breathing air that was purer far than any he had inhaled when walking with Kate Browne that Mr. Malcolm hastened along. What a family they were, these Brownes, he thought, one and all infected with a sort of piratical spirit which made them lawless outcasts from a civilized society . . . save, perhaps, alone the Colonel, for what he had done had, after all, been out of feeling for his wife. But what an atmosphere in which to live! And with a sigh of relief Mr. Malcolm realized that Alaris no longer need remain among them. Paul Norman, he felt assured, would soon alter that, and with the thought he stopped, for his reflections had occupied several moments, and he was now facing the shuttered windows of the small house wherein slept peacefully his friend the inspector of police.

Mr. Malcolm smiled wryly to himself. That sleep must now be broken. Armed with a handful of pebbles, he stepped through the tiny gate and proceeded to fling them, one by one, upon a window on the upper story.

Twenty minutes later Mr. Malcolm left the house. There was a satisfied look on his face, and a smile, a curiously determined smile, hovered about his mouth.

Dawn was just breaking—a primrose light streaking the eastern sky—when at last Mr. Malcolm crept up the drive once more and climbed through the window of the sitting room.

CHAPTER XXI

MR. MALCOLM went straight upstairs to his room. In the pale light of the dawn it was just possible for him to see without having to avail himself of Miss Kate Browne's torch, which he had omitted to return to her at the station. He made no use of it, and his movements were now in direct contrast to his previous conduct throughout every moment of that hectic night. Up to that minute he had been endeavouring in all ways to make as little noise as possible and to attract as little attention as was consistent with his actions. But now he seemed to have cast all his caution to the winds, and he advanced up the stairs just as he might have done were the time five o'clock in the evening and all the house awake, and not, as actually it was, five in the morning and all the house asleep.

The room which Mr. Malcolm had been allocated by Alaris was on the first floor, and his door opened opposite to that of the room in which the grim tragedy had occurred. Mr. Malcolm paused at his door and looked around him. He could just make out the outlines of the other doors upon that landing. Next to his own he knew was that of Vivien Waugh: next again that of the Colonel and his wife. At that end of the landing and opposite to the Colonel's room was that of Alaris, and between her own and that of the room lately occupied by Peter Browne was one which had been kept for Kate Browne. Mr. Malcolm smiled to himself. The memory of that strange old woman as he had last seen her, huddled in the station, made him wonder whether she would not have been far more comfortable had she made use of it.

He entered his room, that bedroom which he had occupied so little during that night, and pulled up the blinds noisily. It would have been very hard for any watcher to infer whether Mr. Malcolm was purposely making more noise than was needful or was merely careless and perhaps a little inconsiderate to the others sleeping within that house. But the blind was one that worked by means of a spring actuated by the cord, and the cord seemed to slip through his fingers perhaps rather more fast than he had anticipated, with the result that as it did so it made a sudden sharp clicking noise which resounded through the night with startling clearness.

With every minute came more daylight, and Mr. Malcolm realized that it would not be necessary for him to use artificial light for his purpose. Near the window, and situated so that anybody seated at it would have his back to the door, there was a desk on which were materials for writing. Mr. Malcolm noted with approval that the sheets of paper were large and that the nib of the pen was of a variety which he was accustomed to use.

"Very satisfactory," said Mr. Malcolm to himself.

And he meant it, for he was about to settle down to perhaps the hardest task which he had yet set himself since undertaking the mission suggested to him by his friend the inspector; it was Mr. Malcolm's intention to set down in black and white precisely all that he had discovered with regard to the death of Peter Browne. It was his habit to make just such a summary in all his cases when he had reached a certain point in his investigations, a summary which he had found particularly useful to coördinate his thoughts and to establish a sequence from which to decide upon his final plan.

Mr. Malcolm sat down at the desk, drew a sheet of paper up to him, and tested his nib. It was as good as it had appeared to be, and with a sigh of satisfaction Mr. Malcolm set to work.

My dear Inspector [he began—for it was his practice in these matters to address such a summary to some living person]:

Herewith a few facts which may interest you. I am sorry that I cannot produce any more definite proof with regard to the conclusions to which I shall come, for I know that you of the police require proof which is irrefutable. On the other hand, I am not without hope that very shortly I will be able to prove beyond all doubt just what I am going to suggest to you by the words which you are now to read.

When you first came to me not so very long ago, in the clubhouse at the golf club, and asked me—not in so many words, of course—to look into this strange death of Peter

Browne, I was interested, as you well knew. If I may say so, you employed an excellent means of arousing my interest. Had you just told me that there had been a murder I would have left it at that, unless specifically asked by you to investigate the matter. But as it was, you just suggested that a certain verdict brought in by a certain jury at a certain Coroner's Court was all wrong, and you knew as well as I did that the bait was good. I have never been able to resist an opportunity of at least attempting to prove authority wrong.

Mr. Malcolm stuck the nib firmly onto the paper and produced a magnificent full stop. He then leant back before starting on his summary. He read the words that he had written, and was satisfied that they produced a reasonable preamble. He replaced the paper on the desk, and was about to start on his third paragraph when he suddenly looked out of the window, and a thoughtful expression came over his face. A casual observer might have imagined that Mr. Malcolm was collecting his thoughts preparatory to placing them on paper, but in point of fact such was not the case. Mr. Malcolm half closed his eyes, then with a quick gesture he rose to his feet, walked over to the dressing table, and removed the mirror which was standing thereon, bringing this to the desk. He placed it in such a position that it faced him and gave him an excellent view, not only of his own physiognomy—which Mr. Malcolm noted, with displeasure, was somewhat unshaven—but also of that expanse of room which, by virtue of his back being turned to it, he could not see. Then, picking up his pen again, with but a few moments of thought before placing it to paper, he returned to his work.

I was faced first of all [he wrote] with the question of whether the coroner's verdict was correct or whether the late Peter Browne had been murdered. Your point, that foul play was suspected, received strong support when you suggested to me that a man would require tremendous nerve to shoot at himself and miss and then to shoot at himself again, and this time kill. But the strength of this point was considerably lessened by the doctor's definite statement that Peter Browne had been a patient of his and was suffering from severe neurosis. This being the case, his actions, had he killed himself, became very much more understandable, since he was more than likely mad when he committed the fatal act.

All the same, I had some personal knowledge of the victim of this temporary insanity or murderer's weapon, and I was definitely of the opinion that Peter Browne, neurotic though he might be, was not so neurotic as to take his life. So I started with a definite bias towards the theory of murder, and having established this in my mind, I started my investigation hopefully and happily. For, as you know, I have two pet occupations—playing golf, if I can so describe the passes which I make at the ball, and proving you policemen wrong. I don't mind putting it baldly like this to you, for I know you will realize that I wish the police force no harm, that I admire it immensely, and that it is but human weakness to err occasionally.

Once again Mr. Malcolm produced an admirable full stop. Then, giving himself only time to light a cigarette, he continued:

My first difficulty was to establish an entrée to the house. I discovered that the solicitor of the late Mr. Browne had collected a family party, presumably to hear his will, on a certain morning, and it so happened that on that morning the golf course was more or less deserted and I could find no partner to play a round of golf with me. This may have come about by my persistent refusal to go near the clubhouse until the very last moment, and thus risk being asked for a game, and because I was successful in choosing a time to start when there was no one about. I played the first three holes by myself, and, surprisingly enough, considering that my thoughts were elsewhere, played them remarkably well in an average of sixes. It thus came about that I was quite reluctant to leave the golf course at the fourth tee, but as I am in the habit of pursuing my plans as prearranged by myself, I resolutely turned my back on the course on reaching the trees bordering the fourth tee, and advanced into the little wood which at this place bounds the house of Peter Browne.

From this spot I had an excellent view across the tennis court to the room in which were gathered the late Peter Browne's relatives, and after a certain clearing away of undergrowth, I established for myself a perfectly good tee for the shot which I proposed to play. I knew that I was taking a risk. I knew that there was every likelihood of my skill at hitting the ball proving inadequate for the occasion, but he who does not take risks achieves nothing, and I reduced the chance of failure as much as possible by selecting my beloved mid-iron for the shot which I was about to play. I aimed for the large window of the sitting room, and I hit the ball as hard as I could, taking great care not to look up. The moment the ball left the ground I knew that I had played a good shot, but it was infinitely better even than I had hoped, for it struck the window low down (I feel I must have struck that ball rather below the centre of the club) and, smashing the glass into smithereens, crashed into the room. Assuming my most meek expression I advanced across the tennis court, thrust my head into the room, which was filled with startled people, and, apologizing, I inquired if the local rules permitted me to recover my ball.

I will not bore you with a description of how, having obtained my lost ball, I yet achieved the object of my visit, which was to remain in that room. Things were made easy for me, as it so happened, by circumstances over which I had no control, but these circumstances combined to place me in complete charge of the situation not more than half an hour after I had first made my somewhat unexpected and certainly shattering entry into that room. The atmosphere around me confirmed me very definitely in my doubts about the verdict of the Coroner's Jury. There were present Alaris, a girl whom you know well, and I think admire and like as much as I do; Paul Norman, whom you also know; a Colonel and Mrs. Angela Browne, his wife, brother and sister-in-law of the deceased; Kate Browne, a curiously unattractive and arctic maiden of some sixty summers (with winters to match); and, lastly, a nephew of the deceased, one Vivien Waugh, of whom I had never previously heard. Mr. Yarrow, the deceased's man-of-affairs, was also present, and appeared to be conducting the meeting. But this was not the usual reading of a dead man's will. There was an electric atmosphere in that room, an atmosphere caused by something which I was not long to discover.

It appeared that the deceased, dissatisfied with the normal form of leaving a will, had made a gramophone record of his intentions, and had required Mr. Yarrow to play this record, on the instrument which he possessed in the sitting room, to those assembled there at that moment. Apparently, just before my ball had struck the window, the record had been placed on the instrument, which had been started, and the first few words had been spoken. In these words the deceased had definitely accused some unknown person of having murdered him. It was at this particular moment that my ball crashed through the window and that I followed it, and in the confusion caused by this double entry someone in that room took the opportunity of removing the record from the instrument without anyone else being any the wiser until Mr. Yarrow turned to the gramophone in order to restart it. This, I may say, was after I had been invited, most unwillingly, to remain.

Here, you will see, my dear Inspector, is another point strongly in favour of the theory of murder, for we have the deceased definitely accusing someone of having murdered him, and someone in that room definitely unwilling to take the risk of the deceased mentioning any name.

From that point things developed rather rapidly. I will not bore you with a full and detailed account of all that happened. If you require this you can have it from my own lips at any time. Let it suffice for me to tell you that I discovered that every single person in that room had a very good reason for wanting the deceased out of the way. There was, in fact, absolutely no lack of motive for murder on the part of all those present, with the exception, of course, of myself and Mr. Yarrow. Very briefly, I feel you should know of these motives: here they are.

Alaris was being given a dreadful time by this man who was her guardian, and was being kept apart from Paul Norman, whom she loved and whom she wished to marry. You know that a heart full of love is apt to be passionate and headstrong, and more than a little foolish: Paul Norman, therefore, had a reason, too, for Alaris was being kept from him.

Kate Browne, the sister, had always loathed her brother, and stood to gain financially by his demise.

Colonel Browne, his brother, had probably the best reason of all, for his wife, Angela, had had a love affair with the deceased before marrying the Colonel, and had, ever since then, been blackmailed by him, unknown to the Colonel. But this blackmailing had come to the Colonel's knowledge, and thus both the Colonel and his wife had every reason to loathe and detest the deceased.

Young Vivien Waugh had an excellent motive, too, for he was penniless and had defrauded his uncle of a large sum of money, which sum, his uncle insisted, must be paid by a certain date or his forgery would be exposed. Waugh had contracted an alliance with a rich lady, and all would have gone well for him had be been able to last out the few extra weeks for which he had asked his uncle to give him grace in returning the stolen money. His uncle had refused, and it was on the night before the stated date when the money had to be forthcoming that Peter Browne was shot.

From all this you will see, my dear Inspector, that the late Peter Browne was about as unattractive an elderly gentleman as it is our lot to meet in this great world of ours, and that the rest of his family—with the possible exception of Colonel Browne and the certain exception of Alaris (if she may be termed part of his family in view of his guardianship)—were very little better than the old rogue himself.

Now, after all this preamble, prick up your ears, my friend. For on the night in question Alaris, the Colonel, and Waugh all acknowledged to having seen the dead man, and, as well as this, the Colonel, Waugh, and Kate Browne all acknowledged to having attempted to kill him. But . . . and this is the interesting point . . . according to their confessions not one of them could possibly have done so.

Let's take Alaris first, and get her well out of the way so that no stain remains upon the poor child's character. Alaris, on her own confession, had supplied him with a sleeping draught on the night that he had died, as was her custom, and had then gone away. This fact—that she had gone from the room, leaving Peter Browne alive—has been corroborated by two independent witnesses, the Colonel and Waugh. She did not see her guardian until the next morning, as otherwise she would have known that the poison which she gave him by mistake would most certainly not have had time to take effect before he was shot. The reason why she gave him poison by mistake for the sleeping draught was that Peter Browne, so afraid was he of foul play, had altered the labels on all the medicine bottles in his cupboard, changing them round one with the other, with the result that Alaris, being the only person who knew the secret, was the only person to whom he would entrust the task of supplying him with medicine. To the bottle of his sleeping draught he had attached the label of the poison bottle and vice versa, and when it came to a question of wondering exactly why he had died, Alaris noticed that she had made a mistake in the bottles in the dark the night before and had given him poison by mistake. For some time she impeded my progress in investigating the case by not telling me. (I may tell you, dear Inspector, that everyone impeded my progress for this self-same reason. Confessions had, more or less, to be forced from them all. If only people would realize that policemen are kind at heart and anxious to disprove rather than to prove damning facts against anybody!) On obtaining this knowledge I went to see the doctor, interested to discover how he could clear himself on this point, for surely he must have known that poison had been administered. I also wanted to know whether he could tell me if the deceased had died as the result of this poison which he had taken or as the result of the shot in his head. The doctor satisfied me with the explanation which he made about the poison. I must ask you not to press this point. I gave him my word that I would not pass on any information which I might receive myself in confidence, and there is nothing in it which might prove of any assistance to you. He also satisfied me that the deceased had died from the shot in his head before the poison had had time to act. I may also say that Alaris is about the last person in the world whom I would imagine capable of murdering anyone, and taking all these things into consideration, I am absolutely satisfied that Alaris is speaking the truth and is entirely cleared.

Let us now regard the case of Kate Browne. It may interest you to know that the deceased was in the habit of receiving threatening letters which were anonymous, and of the origin of which he had no knowledge until after he had made that record. I ascertained from Mr. Yarrow that the record was only made ten days before he was killed, so that this knowledge came to him very recently, and incidentally bears out my theory with regard to the case, for which, however, you must still wait awhile. These letters, which would not have worried an ordinary person, and which an ordinary person would immediately have submitted to the police in the hope that he might be ridden of the nuisance, worried the deceased quite inordinately. This may have been largely due to his neurotic condition, but he used to fly into a violent temper whenever he received one and then immediately destroy it. He never went to the police for protection, he never told a soul about them, but the facts were discovered by his nephew, Vivien Waugh, just after his uncle had received one of the letters. As that young man was calling with a view to raising a loan, it was, perhaps, at a most unpropitious moment for his purpose, but he noticed something—on purpose, through his never-failing curiosity and readiness to discover anything which might be of use to him financially (that is his character—a thoroughly unprincipled scoundrel, albeit quite entertaining)—something which made him realize in a flash from whom that letter had come.

His uncle did not show him the letter: he destroyed it when he had recovered his temper and refused the loan. What actually happened then I do not know. Waugh maintains that he did not divulge to his uncle whence the letters had come, his reason being that he wished to see Kate Browne first with a view to blackmailing her for his silence: you see, she wrote the letters. But I have proof that the deceased wrote to Kate Browne just before his death, reviling her and informing her that Waugh had told him that she was the writer of the letters. Waugh had this information, because on one occasion, when he had been round to her in order to raise a loan (he has done this to all his family and goodness knows how many other people besides), he was left alone in her sitting room for a few moments before his aunt came down to see him, and noticing her typewriter, he idly typed out a few words. There was a fault in the machine, and this same fault was noticeable in the letter which his uncle had received and of which he had caught a glimpse.

I asked Kate Browne exactly why she had written these letters, and she was perfectly frank with me. She told me that she hoped that they would have such an effect on the neurotic disposition of the deceased that he would get worse and die, thereby enabling her to inherit this house in which I am writing, and which was bound to come to her upon his death. She was also quite frank with me in telling me that she was the person who in the first place had removed the record, fearing that her brother had used this method to expose her. Taking advantage of the confusion which my advent to the room had caused, she slipped it from the machine and under the carpet. But when the room was empty (after lunch, it must have been) she looked for it—and it was gone.

I must tell you, my dear Inspector, that her manner with me was entirely frank. I have no definite proof that she was not here in this house on the night in which Peter Browne was murdered, yet I am convinced, with that instinctive knowledge which so rarely deceives me—what you call a hunch—that Kate Browne has now told me the whole truth. On the other hand, it will be easy enough for you to find out where she was on the night that her brother was murdered, and I shall be very surprised if you find out that she was anywhere but perfectly innocently occupied miles from this house.

Now, Inspector, we come to Angela, whom to avoid confusion we had better term Mrs. Colonel. Mrs. Colonel had an affair many years ago, before she married her husband, with his brother, the deceased; I have not gone into the details, as I imagine them to be somewhat unsavoury. She is a nice woman, but stupid; and she was very young at the time. I have no doubt at all that she has lived to regret her folly: Peter Browne took great care that she should. Almost as soon as she married the Colonel, Peter Browne began to blackmail her; she paid him large sums of money in small instalments, all that she could afford, to keep silent about the affair to her husband. At last, a week ago, the Colonel, who had for long suspected the contents of certain letters which his brother kept sending his wife, opened one and discovered the whole sordid little story, and being a direct man, he decided that he would have this matter out with his brother in his own peculiar way. There was never any love lost between the two brothers, and the Colonel, obviously in a cold rage, decided it was about time that his brother was out of the way. I entirely agree with him, but I regret the action which he took. On his own confession he went to the door of his brother's room, after he had seen Alaris leave it and when the coast was clear. He opened the door and fired at Peter Browne who was lying in bed—or so he supposed—with a pistol fitted with a silencer. He was quite certain that his aim was good. He shut the door and left the house. This—if we did not know that the deceased was killed by a shot fired at very close quarters—would be a confession of murder. As it is, it explains the bullet mark on the wall, one of the things which puzzled you and which made you doubt the verdict of suicide. That shot may have been fired before or after the shot that killed Peter Browne, but I say that it was fired before and that the second shot was the fatal one, and I am now going to tell you why I say so, and I am going to give you the name of the man who fired the pistol which killed.

Before I do, however, I want you to realize that what I am telling you, although in my mind the truth without any doubt whatsoever, is, I am afraid, not capable of proof. I have, therefore, arranged matters so that I hope proof will come to you. Perhaps not the proof that you expect, but sufficient proof of intention to put the guilty man, if not on the gibbet, at least in prison for many years.

In the first place, let me give you the events in their proper order. Vivien Waugh left a letter for me which I received about tea time yesterday afternoon. In this letter he confessed to having killed his uncle. He gave me his motives, which I have already described, and he also told me exactly how he had done it. Word for word that confession was the same as the one told me a few hours afterwards by the Colonel. But you must remember that he got in first: that at that time I had heard it only once, and not unnaturally I believed it. Vivien Waugh had told me that he was about to take his life by driving his car over the Devil's Leap. This being the sort of melodramatic means of ending his life which men like Vivien Waugh are apt to choose, I rushed to the spot in the Colonel's car and reached it in time. We had a short argument, and I persuaded him to come back and help me in the search for the murderer, giving him certain information in exchange for his story. I was, however, not entirely satisfied, and I arranged for a little test. I arranged a search party in the house for the missing record, but I kept Vivien Waugh with me and examined with great care a certain part of the bookcase, which would, as a matter of fact, make an admirable hiding place for a record. When I had examined every nook and cranny of this particular spot, I mentioned that at any rate there would be no point in looking there again, as I had so carefully examined it. I hoped in this manner to point out to a man apt to employ almost too cunning methods, a man who even boasted of this trait, that this would be an excellent place to put a record, as it would be perfectly safe from future investigation.

Then we went in to dinner—a most unpleasant meal (I am not surprised that Peter Browne was so dyspeptic with a cook as bad as his)—and then came the Colonel's confession. At once I was interested . . . more than interested: I was relieved and delighted, for I knew then that my task was nearly over, and that Vivien Waugh was the murderer.

Why should I believe the Colonel and not Waugh, when both of them had confessed to me in exactly the same words and when one of them must have been telling a lie? Partly because of instinct, my dear Inspector, and partly because of something else, I have told you that Vivien Waugh is too cunning a creature. Let me tell you why: he will not pursue the simple path if the difficult path, provided that on the surface it is spectacular, is available.

This is a weakness which I hope will lead him to the gallows. You see . . . supposing that he fired the second shot which killed, he must have known about the first shot, he must have been concealed in that room when the Colonel came to the door and fired. He must have known also that a confession in the terms of the first shot would provide him with the best possible vindication, since he had confessed to something which had really occurred and yet which could not possibly have caused the death of Browne. He knew that we were aware of the second shot, for everything presupposes now, consistently with this theory, that it was the second shot that killed. Probably he was at the inquest, heard the full details, and when I came upon the scene—for he was not slow to recognize that I was hand in glove with the police—realized that the weak point in the verdict of suicide was causing authority to investigate. Vivien Waugh has a very cunning brain, and it is my belief that he was hidden in the dead man's room, saw Alaris give him his medicine, knowing nothing of the mistake, of course, which might have saved him all the trouble; saw her leave the room, almost immediately saw the door open again and the first shot follow. In making this confession he knew that he was safe, and it was very unlikely that the person who had fired the first shot would come forward and confess, since that person would certainly believe himself the murderer, as few people were aware that there had been two shots.

But, my dear Inspector, the unlikely thing did happen. There were two identical confessions.

Further to consider the matter, someone was lying. Which was the most likely: the direct, blunt Colonel or the wily Vivien Waugh? I have no hesitation for one moment. Vivien Waugh was the murderer, and I shall be very much surprised if I have not sketched precisely the method in which he succeeded in his plan. But how to prove it? Instinctive knowledge, as you know, Inspector, is worse than useless in a court of law. If only I had been present in the room on the morning of the discovery, if only I had obtained possession of those bullets, that in the wall and that in the head of Peter Browne, the case would have been comparatively simple, but you yourself have told me that the bullet that struck the wall has never been found. I should think that if Vivien Waugh could be made to tell the truth he would inform us that he removed that bullet in order to prevent it being known that two men had attempted to kill Peter Browne. No doubt it was a bullet different in size or make from that which he used to kill his uncle, and he removed it in order to conceal the fact that the two shots had come from different pistols.

I felt confident that if my little ruse with Waugh were to be successful—for you will remember that I had not yet complete data on the case; I wanted badly to hear the remainder of what the deceased had said in that record which he had left behind him—the opportunity would be taken by the young man during the night. So I concealed myself in the sitting room, where I could see without being seen, and I waited. I had not long to wait. Waugh came into that room and concealed the record just where I hoped that his over-cunning brain would lead him to put it, in the very place which I had indicated to him that afternoon. As soon as he had gone I heard that record. I played it with a pin, Inspector, a procedure which enabled me to hear without any chance of being overheard or disturbing those sleeping in the house. But I heard every word that the murdered man intended for his relations. It was really of very little use. It reviled at Kate Browne, as I expected that it would: it was more or less the ravings of a man temporarily mad, and bore out largely all that the doctor had told me. I replaced it in its hiding place, where it is now . . . and I came up to my room.

Mr. Malcolm put down his pen, Mr. Malcolm thoughtfully sat back in his chair and lit another cigarette. Mr. Malcolm's eyes wandered towards the mirror. Not by one jot did Mr. Malcolm's body stiffen, his expression alter, nor did he cease drawing at his cigarette. But Mr. Malcolm saw something reflected in that mirror, saw the image quite clearly of someone about whom he had been writing. The door had been closed behind this person, who was standing almost over Mr. Malcolm, but his advent had been so silent that it had passed unnoticed by the seated man.

Very quietly Mr. Malcolm leant forward and took up his pen.

"Ah, well," he said, half aloud, "I'd better sign it and then snatch a few minutes' sleep."

Mr. Malcolm's right hand began to actuate the pen, but his eyes were looking upwards, from underneath his eyebrows, never leaving the mirror in front of him. The figure just behind the seated man suddenly moved his right hand. Very quietly it came out from behind his back, where subconsciously he had been concealing the weapon which he proposed to use. Up went his right hand slowly, carefully to the required height . . . down it came like a flash.

Mr. Malcolm fell forward onto the desk without even a moan.

"Got you," said Vivien Waugh—"got you, my clever friend!"

CHAPTER XXII

VIVIEN WAUGH paid no heed whatsoever to the man to whom he had dealt such a cruel blow. Instead, he replaced within his pocket the instrument which his cunning fingers had fashioned for his purpose, and which to the criminal confraternity is known as a sandbag. He pushed aside one of the arms of the figure which sprawled grotesquely over the desk, and picked up the few sheets of paper which were lying upon it and on which Mr. Malcolm had so recently been writing. Vivien Waugh was in no hurry. He knew that his advent to that room had been noiseless: he knew that no one could have heard the sound of the blow, and he had taken great care, before he had entered that room, to ascertain for certain that no one was awake.

He glanced at his wrist watch and saw that it was only just six. There would be another hour at least before the servants would be rising, and in the stillness of the morning he felt assured that through the open window he would have warning by the very means which they themselves employed to awaken. As if to accentuate this confidence, an early bird, perhaps excited by the unexpected discovery of a particularly delicious breakfast, chirruped suddenly, and the sound came to him with startling clarity. Casually Waugh glanced out of the window and noticed the bird some distance from the house. If this sound could be heard so clearly, then certainly he would hear the alarm clock of whichever servant was the first to rise.

But Vivien Waugh had no intention of staying in the house so long. On the other hand, he had every intention of reading all that Mr. Malcolm had put onto paper, and it was not without a great interest that he seated himself in a chair beside the bed, which his enemy had obviously not used at all that night, and started to read. Once or twice while he read the script an ironical smile spread over his features. But he was absorbed in his lecture, and no sound came from between his lips. It took him some little time to read all that had been written on those sheets of paper, but when he looked up he glanced straight at the sprawling figure crouched by the desk, and in his eyes there was a hint almost of unwilling admiration.

"Mr. Malcolm," he said, expectant of no reply, in low tones so that no one outside that room could possibly have heard—"Mr. Malcolm, I take my hat off to you. You have reconstructed the actual facts in a manner which simply amazes me, and you have evidently judged my character almost perfectly. I say 'almost' advisedly, for you have forgotten two things. Taken together they were fatal, and the first is a serious mistake. You want to know what it is?

Right! I'll tell you." He laughed. "You suggested to me at the same time as you suggested—although I didn't know it—an excellent place for hiding the record, a place to which you yourself would then go and collect it . . . you also suggested to me that you were getting too dangerous and that I ought to put you out of the way. You remember what you said to me? I shall never forget those words, for they gave me the solution to my problem: 'If a man murders once, does he go on murdering?' and also, 'I expect to be killed at any moment.' You never thought that I would give you the answer and take your advice, did you?"

He laughed harshly, a laugh which belied the calm nature of his words and the coolness in his voice. Vivien Waugh was evidently feeling the strain of his narrow escape from exposure and the consequences thereof far more than he would have cared to admit even to himself. But his voice, when he continued to speak, was as calm and even as it had been up to that moment.

"Your second mistake, Mr. Malcolm, was to think that I was too cunning. Perhaps my ways were devious, and perhaps it appeared to you on the surface that my vanity would only permit me to choose an intricate path. But what more simple than the method by which I have undertaken to rid myself of you? That is direct action, which presumably you never thought I might adopt."

He rose to his feet.

"But enough, Mr. Malcolm. Let's proceed with the disposal of your body. The arrangements are all complete."

He advanced to the fireplace, and, lighting a match, placed the sheets of paper which he had so carefully read one by one within its flame, watching them flare up into a sudden blaze and then slowly crumple into ashes. Rising swiftly to his feet, he then advanced towards the figure, which lay, still motionless, in precisely the same position as he had left it, sprawled over the desk. He pulled Mr. Malcolm back into his chair so that he lay back with his head lolling on one side and his eyes closed. Vivien Waugh examined him carefully, but first of all he placed his hand over Mr. Malcolm's heart and noticed that the beats were regular. There was no sign of his regaining consciousness, however.

"I do hope," said Vivien Waugh to himself, "that I haven't hit you too hard, Mr. Malcolm. I would like to have a word or two with you before you go. Go where? Ah! That's my surprise for you, my last surprise for you."

Waugh took from his pockets two lengths of stout string, which evidently he had placed there for the purpose in hand. With these he quickly bound together Mr. Malcolm's ankles and Mr. Malcolm's wrists. Then, treating Mr. Malcolm rather as a sack, he lifted him over his shoulder, revealing a strength which his lithe figure would not have suggested. He carried him, without any hesitation, and careful to make no noise, to the door of the room, which he had opened slightly. For a few seconds Vivien Waugh remained within the room listening intently, but no sound came to his ears. Evidently the coast was clear. He stepped out onto the landing and looked carefully around, but all the doors were closed, and evidently within that house everyone was still asleep. He turned to the stairs and descended them, thanking his uncle for the first time in his life for the foresight which had led him to provide a thick stair carpet upon which movement was completely soundless. He hastened across the hall, and placed Mr. Malcolm, not without care, on a chair by the front door.

For a few moments Vivien Waugh rested. Mr. Malcolm was no light weight, and the exertion of carrying him down those stairs had been fairly heavy. But it was not long before Waugh had recovered his breath. He then moved quickly to the sitting room, opened the door, and stepped straight over to that part of the bookcase in which the record was hidden. Taking this from it, he placed the round disc under the carpet in the opposite corner of the room to that described by Kate Browne as its first hiding place. Then he returned to the hall.

"I'm taking just a little extra precaution, Mr. Malcolm," he said, "in case you should have told anyone of your suspicions and it might seem sensible to them to investigate their truth. I have taken certain steps. It may even cause doubts as to the veracity of your whole theory if an inquisitive official does not find the record where you say it should be found."

He laughed grimly, and then, once again hoisting Mr. Malcolm over his shoulder, he opened the front door and moved out into the keen air of the early morning. He looked quickly around him, but, as he had expected, there was no sign of anyone. Turning sharply on his heel, he moved across to the garage, wherein he had housed his car for the night, and, opening the doors, he placed Mr. Malcolm on the seat beside that of the driver. Then, slipping into the driving seat, he started the car, and ensuring that the engine made as little noise as possible by getting at once into top gear, drove slowly past the house and out onto the road which led to the clubhouse.

Once at a sufficient distance from the house, however, his tactics changed. Evidently he was in a hurry to get his business over, for he paid no attention to any noise which his car might make, and let it out to the full. The air rushed past him, and once or twice, as he drove steadily along, Vivien Waugh cast a glance at the figure huddled beside him. But Mr. Malcolm showed no sign of recovering consciousness, and a satirical smile, a smile satanic almost in its gloating exultation of power, disfigured the young man's face. Into his mind came a sudden remembrance of the last time that he had been seated before the steering wheel of his car, tearing along the road towards the bleak promontory of the Devil's Leap.

His thoughts then had been far different, far less assured and jubilant. Only a few short hours had intervened, and yet how entirely had his position altered! Now he was top dog: within his hands lay the winning cards, while on that last perilous dash to the Leap his mind had been torn by a thousand anxieties, prey to a multitude of cares. He smiled at his thoughts then: would his bluff, so full of danger and hazards to himself, succeed? Would Mr. Malcolm swallow the bait and race to the cliff as fast as he could in order to "save" him? Vivien Waugh sighed happily. It had been a nerve-racking, anxious time, but from it all he had emerged triumphant.

They arrived at last at the point where the winding path below the cliff left the main road. Waugh turned his car into this rough road and proceeded more slowly until he reached the summit. Here he carefully placed the car in a position very similar to that in which Mr. Malcolm himself had seen it on his arrival at the plateau the previous afternoon. Waugh alighted and shut the door, then he walked to the edge of the cliff and looked down at the sea.

Morning had long since taken the place of dawn, but among the clouds no sudden gleam of sun lightened the gloom that lay like a heavy veil over the day. On the far horizon a line of black marked the fast approach of rain, and it seemed to tinge the sea with a sinister shadow. Waves, wild and stormy, hurled themselves with loud protest against the rocks at the bottom of the cliff, so that spray was shot into the air, reaching halfway up its crumbling sides. A cold damp mist lent an atmosphere of forlorn discomfort to the dreariness of the morning, a discomfort which was still further accentuated by the stinging keenness of the wind. For a second Vivien Waugh shivered involuntarily: the scene was not one calculated to inspire admiration, yet for a few moments longer he stood watching the spray, reluctantly admiring the aptness of this final setting which he had staged for the benefit of the unconscious man in the car.

Then he turned, as if his final decision had been made and the time for drawing up the curtain on this last scene had now arrived, and, walking rapidly towards the car, he opened the door opposite to the steering wheel and again studied carefully his prisoner. But Mr. Malcolm appeared to be in exactly the same state as when he had left him.

"Damn it, Mr. Malcolm," said Vivien Waugh quietly—"damn it, I must have hit you a little too hard. I wanted badly that you should recover sufficiently to hear what I had to say to you before you . . . went. But it's not to be, I see. I'll tell you my plan, the little arrangement I have made for you, all the same. You told me on this very spot, and not so long ago, that you had no desire to go over the Devil's Leap, much as Satan did, if the old story is true. I told you that I thought it would be rather a magnificent end, and that it would be an exhilarating feeling to fly over that cliff in a machine that would not fly of its own accord, but only from the impetus gained by a short run and then a fall over the cliff down to the waters below. I believe that to be true, Mr. Malcolm, but in view of the fact that I am singularly unselfish, I propose to hand over the exhilaration of the accomplishment for your pleasure rather than for my own. I shall be able to watch, that is all. You will never know now how you came by your death unless Satan himself tells you. I'm sorry about that: I should have liked to tell you. It's the only thing that has gone wrong."

He laughed again, but there was a mercilessly cruel tone in that laugh which had in it no sound of human merriment: it was harsh and bitter and full of a gloating jubilation which was brimful of hate. Then, quickly taking a knife from his pocket, he cut the string which held the wrists and ankles of Mr. Malcolm.

"I don't intend your body to be found and for someone to ask questions," he said quietly. "Oh, no, Mr. Malcolm: I'm not such a fool as that. You shall go in state, Mr. Malcolm"—he laughed again—"very largely because the car will never be recovered. No one will ever know what has happened to you. It would be more easy for the fishes to displace your body from either of these exposed front seats, so you shall travel in the back, which is so nicely enclosed. Besides, it may protect you from the damp . . . at first."

Lifting the motionless body of the recumbent man from the front seat of the car, he placed Mr. Malcolm upright in the back seat, pushing him into position.

"You may fall off, Mr. Malcolm," he said, "out of that excellent throne which you now occupy. I can't help that. But you look, if I may say so, almost regal in your present attitude. I am doing my best for you. If only you were conscious you would get a princely sensation as you go to your death."

Then quickly Vivien Waugh doffed the soft hat which he was wearing to the figure of the man whom he loathed, and, closing the door, he ran round the car. In a second he had started it. He slipped the clutch into place and let the car move forward. When it was moving slowly towards the edge of the cliff, Waugh jumped out onto the step and placed his right hand on the hand throttle, keeping his left still on the wheel. When he was within about forty yards of the edge, Waugh suddenly jerked the hand throttle as far forward as it would go . . . and with a roar the car leapt forward. But even as it did so Vivien Waugh stepped lightly to the ground and ran along for a few paces, watching the machine leap forward. The ground was even: no undulation caught the wheels to alter the direction of the car, now completely out of control, and suddenly, even as Vivien Waugh followed it to the edge, it went out of sight.

It was only then, when the note of the engine died away almost in a scream, as the cliff itself seemed to swallow up the sound, that Vivien Waugh heard a voice from behind him. He turned quickly, but even as he did so he knew that something had gone wrong, and his face had whitened to a deathly pallor. The smile of exultation fled from his lips, and in a second hate and fear lifted away for always the mask of careless indifference which so few events in his life had ever compelled him to shed. His expression seemed to have altered entirely: it was as though the spirit of evil itself had moulded each feature, for cunning sat upon his brow, his lips were drawn back in a snarl of rage, while in his eyes despair and fury fought for mastery.

For the sight that met those eyes confirmed Vivien Waugh's worst fears: running across the plateau as fast as he could go, flourishing a revolver in his right hand, was approaching a man in the uniform of an inspector of police.

"You've killed him!" screamed this man. "My God! You've killed him!"

Only for a moment did Vivien Waugh hesitate; then, with an acceptance of the situation which typified a fatalistic realization of the inevitable, the expression on his face altered, and a faint despairing smile curved his lips.

"I may have killed him," he said quietly, so quietly that the running figure could not possibly have heard him. "I may have killed you, Mr. Malcolm, but you've got me after all."

He turned, and in a few steps had reached the very edge of the precipitous cliff. He turned again and faced the running figure, now only a few yards from him.

With a courteous movement he bowed towards him and then stepped backwards into space.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHEN Mr. Malcolm first made his appearance at the golf club after his short but enforced sojourn in the local cottage hospital, enforced because of the blow which Vivien Waugh had dealt him with his home-made sandbag, he was greeted by two figures as he approached the doorway—that of a girl and a youth. Mr. Malcolm smiled. He was pleased to see Alaris and pleased to see Paul Norman, more particularly because of some news that the inspector had given him only a few hours previously when he had visited him in the hospital.

"So you haven't waited long," he said, "not even until I could attend the wedding,"

Alaris laughed.

"We couldn't!" she said. "After all, we'd waited long enough already."

"I know you had."

Mr. Malcolm smiled. He looked approvingly at the girl. Gone was all the care that had lain like a veil over her face, hiding her beauty: in its place was a content and happiness which brought to life all that unusual charm which the fascination of her smile had always suggested. She was smiling now; and in her cheeks—no longer white and drawn—two dimples played mischievously. From her Mr. Malcolm glanced at Paul Norman, and noted that on his face, too, happiness had worked like magic, lending it apparently an additional and pleasing charm.

"I want to ask you a question, Mr. Malcolm," said Alaris quietly. "The inspector has told us all about the way in which you found it out. But there's something which baffles us all."

"Surely not such an intelligent man as the inspector," said Mr. Malcolm, smiling. "Dear, dear, surely not!"

Mr. Malcolm paused. But Mr. Malcolm rather wanted to be asked, and shyness seemed to be going to rob him of an opportunity to answer.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"Weren't you unconscious in the car when . . . when . . ."

"When it went over the cliff?" said Mr. Malcolm. "Of course not! How could I have been if I am here now? You believe that, don't you?"

Alaris laughed. For a moment Mr. Malcolm hesitated, and then he sat down.

"In exchange for a little information from Paul Norman," he said quietly, "I will tell you, Mrs. Norman, all that happened."

"What on earth d'you want from me?" asked Norman in surprise.

"That will come later. You will answer it, of course?" Mr. Malcolm smiled. "Very well, then. I was watching our friend Vivien Waugh when he came into my room. I knew he was coming, you see. At least, I felt as certain of it as that he would put the record away in the place that I had indicated to him. I took a risk, for he might have shot me, but . . . well, he didn't. I thought that he would render me unconscious in some way, as he actually attempted to, and so when he hit at me I was watching him very carefully, and I made a very slight movement to the left. The result was that although temporarily he knocked me quite stupid, the feeling did not last long and I was . . ."

"You were shamming," cried Alaris delightedly—"you were shamming all the time."

"Not quite all the time," said Mr. Malcolm quietly. "Had I been, there would have been no reason for my miserable last few days spent in bed . . . but very nearly all the time. The worst and most difficult part of my little act was to listen to him reviling me for making mistakes which I hadn't made. You see, I knew that I couldn't get him for the murder of your guardian because I knew I couldn't prove anything and could get no proof, so I suggested to him that he should make an attempt at murdering me, and then we could have him on that count. A nice idea, I think."

"Good Lord!" said Norman. "But you were taking a frightful risk!"

"The world is full of risks, young man," Mr. Malcolm smiled. "You take them, too. . . . You've just been married. No! It wasn't such a risk as all that.

For I had previously arranged, in the small hours of the morning on which he made his attempt to kill me, that my friend the inspector would be in waiting outside, and if either Vivien Waugh or myself left the house he would dog our footsteps and prevent my coming to any harm. Poor man! I'm sorry I gave him that shock on the plateau. He seemed quite fond of me by the way he was carrying on when I approached him."

"What was he doing?" asked Alaris.

"I should say," said Mr. Malcolm, "that he was performing one of the original aboriginal gyrations of the back of beyond. He was also using language which I feel sure is not in keeping with his position as inspector of police, quite apart from being disrespectful of the dead. I had to explain to him on the spot how it so happened that I had not risen from the whirlpool at the bottom of the Devil's Leap. It really took him some time to believe that I was actually there and that he was not suffering from some peculiar form of hallucination."

"But how did you get out of the car?" asked Alaris.

"Very easily," said Mr. Malcolm. "I stepped out . . . on the side opposite to that on which Vivien Waugh was seated. As he started the car and got her going towards the edge of the cliff, I stepped out on the other side, from the back, and slipped behind some bushes which were growing most conveniently near. Neither Waugh, who never looked round, nor the inspector, who had his eyes glued on the other side of the car, saw me at all." For a moment Mr. Malcolm paused. "I'm sorry he took his own life," he said quietly, in an entirely different tone of voice, speaking seriously for the first time since he had met the pair. "I should have liked to send him for trial, because when he thought that I was unconscious he admitted to me—and he would have found it very hard to deny—that all that I had surmised was true. I think we could have sent him to the gallows—a better ending than one of his own making."

For a long moment there was silence. Then suddenly Paul Norman looked up at Mr. Malcolm.

"Thank you, sir," he said—"thank you a thousand times . . . for everything. And for Alaris."

Mr. Malcolm laughed.

"Nonsense!" he said. "It was a shot in the dark, just a bit of bluff . . . and it worked. Now then—your turn."

"My turn?"

"You promised," said Mr. Malcolm mischievously, "to answer any question that I might put to you if I told you the true tale."

"Yes," said Norman, "and I'm ready to carry out my promise. What do you want to know?"

"Well," said Mr. Malcolm thoughtfully, "I've been reading a book, during my enforced leisure in the hospital . . . a book entitled *How to Beat Bogey*. Now it says in that book that the left arm should be kept absolutely rigid throughout the swing. I would like you to tell me whether . . ."

From within the clubhouse a burst of laughter drowned the voice of Mr. Malcolm. And at that moment the sun, perhaps unwilling to listen-in to shop, retired over the horizon.

THE END

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